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WORKING WOMEN IN DICKENS'S FICTION

by

BENAZIR DURDANA

A THESIS

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To my mother

ABSTRACT

Although there exists a dauntingly vast accumulation of Dickensian criticism, not much attention has been given to the minor characters in Dickens's fiction. A close look at minor, female roles reveals an empathy with the working woman that contradicts the common assumption that Dickens prefers the traditional, domestic role for women. One finds in his work a richly varied representation of work experiences available to women in the Victorian age. They include business, teaching, paid companionship, nursing, dressmaking, laundering, domestic service and various kinds of artistic endeavour. The novelist draws extensively from the crafts and mannerisms associated with these professions and this lends colourful variety to his characterization. But apart from playing with the surface texture of work experience, Dickens delves deep into the problems and conflicts of different occupations with a sensitivity that is surprising in a man of his time. He shows true concern for the exploitation of the labouring class, and for the specific degradations suffered by women in their professional capacity. Whether or not work proves to be sufficiently rewarding, financially, to these women, the work experience itself is shown to be an ennobling and educative influence in their lives. Their greater self-awareness, knowledge of the world and active participation in the social sphere outside the narrow domestic circle make them more interesting and entertaining than the fully domestic heroines of Dickens's novels.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NN	Nicholas Nickleby
OCS	Old Curiosity Shop
MC	Martin Chuzzlewit
DS	Dombey and Son
DC	David Copperfield
HT	Hard Times
LD	Little Dorrit
OMF	Our Mutual Friend

INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that, to Charles Dickens, the proper place for women is within the home and marriage is the most desirable means of access to it. Through the characters of Mrs Pardiggle and Mrs Jellyby, in Bleak House, he has pointedly, though with farcical exaggerations, shown the evils brought about by women whose vision is focused outside the home. Dickens is not alone in creating this ideal role of the domesticated woman; as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued, there has been a persistent trend in literature in the formation of female stereotypes, because fiction originated in the hands of male writers and it remained for women to evolve a true self-portrait, free from the influence of inherited traditions: "a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her."[1] Even less radical critics like Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark, in a book exploring the ambivalent attitudes towards women of male authors of the Victorian age, admit that their novels

> do seem to offer their readers hundreds of 'pattern young ladies' (Inspector Bucket's term for Esther Summerson) and equally stereotypic shrews, rapacious spinsters, rosy coquettes, raven-haired temptresses, and so forth.[2]

Patricia Stubbs, in a book entitled Women and Fiction, traces the reason behind the domestication of women to the Industrial Revolution, which turned English society into such a fiercely impersonal and competitive one that it was left to the women to administer a beguiling antidote to

the work-worn man: "Returning home from the pressures of the real world, economic man was supposedly soothed and elevated by the spirituality, virtue and domestic charm of his wife."[3] And turning to fiction, she has no difficulty in identifying Dickens as the writer who has most pervasively celebrated this situation in his novels: "As far as fiction is concerned, we find the apotheosis of this idea of home as the sacred retreat from unwelcome external realities in Dickens."[4]

Critics in general, when discussing Dickens's portrayal of women, dwell on the idealized heroines or the satirized spinsters and wives, and thereby reinforce the idea that his vision of women is a fragmented one--that he cannot see woman as a complex embodiment of vice and virtue, reason and passion, efficiency and fallibility. I feel that such critics themselves have a fragmented view of Dickens's work; they fail to take into consideration, or do not scrutinize closely enough, a particularly revealing role for women that Dickens presents in many forms and variations in all his novels, namely, that of the working woman. Dickens is aware that just as the ideal Victorian woman is not plentiful in society, so the ideal situation for women--marriage and domestic seclusion--is not available to all of them. Out of this unpleasant fact that women may sometimes be driven to work for a living, because they have no father, brother or husband to provide for them, emerges a fertile ground for the writer's creative imagination. True that, given the choice, many of these women would rather not work, and many do in fact cease to work when they are fortunate enough to find a husband. Yet work for women appears as a real concern in Dickens's novels, and reflects faithfully the inclusion of women in the economic structure of Victorian England. More important, it touches areas of conflict that inevitably

appear when women are obliged to set aside traditional roles in a patriarchal society and adopt a profession.

Much has been written about Victorian prudery, but not everyone has pondered upon the implications of it in Dickens's attitude to women. Thus, while Patricia Stubbs emphasizes the weight of public opinion in determining what an author chose to write at that time, she does not see in this a reason to be sceptical about the authorial voice:

> Society operated an extensive apparatus for banning as well as bowdlerizing and it did not hesitate to use it. This meant that if they wanted to be published at all, writers had to accept severe restrictions on the scope and treatment of their material.[5]

But the writers of Corrupt Relations are discerning enough to realize that deference to public opinion can itself be a comment on prevailing ideas and beliefs. Elaborating on the Victorian novelist's use of convention, they remark that

> this tendency has understandably seemed to many readers merely a passive reflection of prevailing masculine attitudes. But these same novelists, in a multitude of ways, draw attention to their process of distortion, so that we become aware of the stereotyped attitudes as well as of the stereotypes themselves.[6]

It must have disturbed Dickens that not many alternatives to marriage existed for women, even when a large number of them "for accidental or numerical reasons were not likely to marry."[7] In his fiction, women yearn unrelentingly towards the matrimonial state, even when marriage can result in oppression by husbands like Mr Dombey and Mr Quilp. And no wonder, because the alternative, working for a living, is not much better in the economic and social context of Victorian England. Dickens is obliged to participate in the elaborate social deception that he satirizes so extensively, under the general name of Podsnappery:

> It was an inconvenient and exacting institution, as requiring everything in the universe to be filed down and fitted to it. The question about everything was, would it bring a blush into the cheek of the young person? And the inconvenience of the young person was, that, according to Mr Podsnap, she seemed always liable to burst into blushes when there was no need at all.[8]

Is this not sufficient indication that Dickens accepted the conventions of his society as necessary constraints and used his art as a covert medium to expose its wrongs? By holding up for scrutiny the often fictive idyll of marriage and domestic bliss in his novels, he is, among other things, commenting on the limitations society placed on the Victorian woman. Barickman, MacDonald and Stark seem to agree that "in focusing on courtship and marriage, the chief concerns of most Victorian women, Dickens, Collins, Thackeray, and Trollope raise fundamental questions about their culture's sexual practices."[9] One reason why the general Victorian consensus was against broadening opportunities for women was the "fear of 'coarsening' women's 'superior moral nature' and so blurring the distinction between work and home, between public and private."[10] To them feminism was really masculinism, as it appears from the terminology used by one critic to describe the difficulties involved in the mid-nineteenth-century Woman's Question: "Much of the fire has gone out of the woman's movement because masculinism has been tried and found wanting."[11] Indeed, writers of fiction have enjoyed portraying the "unsexed" militant woman fighting moral battles outside the home and even Dickens often equates strength of mind in women with masculinity, decidedly an abhorrent quality in them. It is a question worth considering whether working women in Dickens's fiction are "unsexed" through the rigours of their self-supporting role.

So we come to the principal questions upon which this thesis is

based. First, the very number and variety of the working women in Dickens's novels call for some special attention. Such a study will undeniably reveal an aspect of Dickens's attitude towards women not usually apparent, and modify the common judgement of him as a conventional thinker. Second, given the economic and social structure of Victorian England, which forms alike the fictional framework of Dickens's novels, what opportunities are open to women who wish to provide for themselves through work? Third, does working for a living offer a serious threat to women's sexuality? In other words, do working women lose the natural caring and nurturing instincts and sensibilities normally associated with femininity? Fourth, how do the women themselves view their role, that is, how well integrated are their personalities and the situation in which they find themselves?

The first concern has motivated my examination of the working woman's role in Dickens's fiction; for the sake of brevity, I have limited myself to six novels, two from each phase of his literary life--Nicholas Nickleby and The Old Curiosity Shop from the early period; Martin Chuzzlewit and David Copperfield from the middle period; and Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend from the late period. Businesswomen, like Mrs Jarley and Sally Brass of The Old Curiosity Shop, are seen to achieve a high level of independence, while governesses and lady companions like Ruth Pinch of Martin Chuzzlewit and Rosa Dartle of David Copperfield illustrate the evils of social subordination. Professional jargon enters into the speech of characters like Mrs Gamp of Martin Chuzzlewit and Mrs Crummles of Nicholas Nickleby, leading to comic and colourful effects. Amy Dorrit of Little Dorrit and Betty Higden of Our Mutual Friend deserve to be mentioned particularly because of their unfailing allegiance to the

principle of working for a living.

My study shows that, in general, Dickens's world offers a bleak prospect for women seeking employment as a means of subsistence. In the absence of clearly-defined state regulations governing employment, working conditions in Victorian England were exploitative at worst and uncertain at best, for both men and women. Added to this phenomenon, we find in Dickens's novels insecurity and persecution increased in the experience of women. Only the self-employed have relative freedom to profit from their work. Of these, women engaged in private business, whether large or small, are fairly well-off and enjoy a certain social prestige at their own level. For the majority who are employed by others, work is restrictive and socially demeaning. However, profitable or not, work does not make them lesser women; if anything, it helps to enhance their humanity and define their sexuality in bolder lines, and fills these outlines with more colour and vitality than that presented in the vaguely-realized figures of Dickens's fully domesticated heroines.

As far as self-awareness is concerned, working women in Dickens's novels are not entirely comfortable with their independence; indeed, considering the historical milieu in which these novels originate, it would be surprising if they were. As critics and historians have amply demonstrated, the woman's transcendence of the traditional, domestic role introduces sociological and psychological conflict. This conflict is particularly acute in the case of middle-class women of genteel upbringing, ladies by birth, education and moral conditioning, who are forced to work because they lack the fortune of a lady or are deprived of a protector-provider, in the person of a male member of the family. This schism between the desired self-image and the inadequacies and indignities of

their actual position in society, causes severe psychological distortions in some characters. For women from a lower social rank, physical suffering is emphasized over psychological malaise, but among them, too, the lure of domesticity and motherhood is strong. Most of these working women try to come to terms with the incongruity between their conventional feminine consciousness and the fact of their self-supportiveness, through the creation of certain fictions either about themselves or about their world. Some of these fictions are deliberate and explicit; many are covert and are not perceived as fabulations by the characters themselves. The external fact of their working experiences and this internal conflict combine to give their characters a rich complexity. Gilbert and Gubar argue that "self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is,"[12] but Dickens's working women seem to negate the validity of this statement. These are Victorian women with limited self-awareness; yet, through the struggles of their partial consciousness to assert their identity, they surprise us with the intensity of their <u>being</u>, even if they do not know what they are.

I have found Michael Slater's book, <u>Dickens and Women</u>,[13] a very helpful guide. Basically, he examines the role of important women in Dickens's life in the shaping of his attitude towards women. They include Elizabeth Dickens, his mother; Fanny, his sister; Maria Beadnell, his first love; Catherine, his wife; Mary and Georgina Hogarth, his sisters-in-law; Katey and Mamie, his daughters; and Ellen Ternan, assumed to have been his mistress. On account of the breadth of his topic, Slater does not address himself specifically or at length to the problem of working women in Dickens's fiction. Nevertheless, his work provides an excellent background for studies with a narrower focus on Dickens's female characters.

CHAPTER I

INDEPENDENT BUSINESS

The category of work accessible to women in Dickens's fiction and most rewarding to them in monetary gain, social prestige and control of their private lives, is independent business. We have several examples of businesswomen, occupying different degrees on the social scale, from Mrs Clennam, at the head of an established, multi-national commercial house, to Pleasant Riderhood in Our Mutual Friend, who "Upon the smallest of small scales, . . . was an unlicensed pawnbroker" and who started her business with a "secret capital of fifteen shillings" (OMF, p. 406), found under the pillow of her dead mother. These women are evidently a privileged group, in the sense that business, no matter how humble in scope, frees one from the necessity of working under an employer. But business has its burdens too and demands competence and industry; and all these women display a capacity for hard work, a shrewd understanding of the people whom they deal with, the practical application of economic principles and, above all, a definite consciousness of the range and limits of their power. They value their hard-earned economic independence, their social status and their power to do good or evil, as active participants in a life outside the narrow domestic circle. When the power and security of their position are threatened, they are prepared to fight or make the requisite compromises.

Yet, paradoxically, they also seem uncomfortable with their independence and business success. This is not surprising when it becomes

apparent that their dynamic role as working women conflicts directly with the socially approved, female role of passive domesticity. Almost all women in this category lack sexual partners on a par with themselves. Mrs Clennam has been a wife only in name; any real partnership that she has is with her servant, Jeremiah Flintwinch, and it is strictly business. Mme Mantalini of Nicholas Nickleby allows herself to be deluded by an unscrupulous fortune-hunter but eventually shakes off this parasite to save herself. Mrs Jarley of The Old Curiosity Shop and Mrs Lupin of Martin Chuzzlewit stoop to marry their employees in order to find personal happiness. In the latter novel, Mrs Todgers's ill-concealed dream of becoming the second Mrs Pecksniff remains unrealized. Pleasant Riderhood belongs to a rather lowly segment of society herself, and her marriage to Venus does not involve the question of inequality. Only Sally Brass of The Old Curiosity Shop and Abbey Potterson of Our Mutual Friend show no inclination for a sexual relationship and seem entirely satisfied with their self-image. The rest indulge in various forms of fantasy, deliberate or sub-conscious, to reconcile their conflicting desires to be womanly, in the socially approved sense, and to be successful as working women.

One notable circumstance is that most of these independent businesswomen are mature or elderly. The attractive Mrs Lupin is a matronly widow and even though she has long "passed through her state of weeds, and burst into flowers again," she is "not exactly what the world calls young" (MC, p. 79). Sally and Pleasant are relatively young but their youth appeals to no one. The portrayal of these two characters is such that Pleasant's name becomes a mockery, and Sally's sex a joke. Michael Slater, in his book Dickens and Women, studies Dickens's attitude

to women in great detail, and according to him Dickens views older women as either Good Providers or Bad Providers.[1] This distinction seems particularly applicable to businesswomen in Dickens's novels, since they have enough to satisfy their own needs and a surplus to offer to the needy. In almost all the examples available, there is an insistence on the novelist's part to identify physical need with comfort or deprivation; that is, to use the metaphor of food and drink in conjunction with the concept of giving. Mrs Jarley, Mrs Lupin, Mrs Todgers and Miss Potterson are clearly Good Providers. Even Pleasant Riderhood is not averse to offering a sailor a drink, though she "had it in her blood, or had been trained, to regard seamen, within certain limits, as her prey" (OMF, p. 406). Mrs Clennam, Sally Brass and Mrs Crupp of David Copperfield fit the appellation "Depriver" better than the strictly opposite "Bad Provider" suggested by Slater. Mrs Clennam imposes puritanical self-restraint on herself and others, although she is sufficiently self-indulgent to allow herself "an invalid regimen of oysters and partridges" (LD, p. 96). Sally's cruel pretence of regaling her child-drudge with "two square inches of cold mutton" at the end of the latter's actual meal, "a dreary waste of cold potatoes, looking as eatable as Stonehenge" (OCS, p. 351), is one of the most painfully memorable episodes in all of Dickens's fiction. Mrs Crupp steals David's provisions so blatantly that, with all his naiveté, he is forced to ruminate "that it is surprising how much coffee Mrs Crupp used, and how weak it was, considering" (DC, p. 417). Only Mme Mantalini seems to belong to neither category--the Good Provider or Depriver--for she provides food to her employees as a necessary part of her business contract ("Your meals, . . . that is, dinner and tea, you will take here" [NN, p. 192]), and is utterly indifferent to whether or not

they are satisfied with it.

The most prosperous working woman in Dickens's fiction is Mrs Clennam, the "sole executrix" (LD, p. 85) of Clennam and Company. She is efficient and meticulously industrious, despite the fact that her movement is hampered by paralysis (an affliction later seen to have its root in her psychological inflexibility, rather than any physical disorder). The death of Arthur's father and Arthur's own decision to leave the family business places upon Mrs Clennam the burden of running the firm by herself, and this challenge she faces with courage and determination. Arthur expects that she will need time to adjust to the new situation, but finds her in complete control of her affairs and up to date with her accounts: "The accounts are made out . . . . The vouchers have been examined and passed" (LD, p. 85). At first glance, such constancy of purpose and alacrity of execution seems admirable, but the more we know of Mrs Clennam and her work, the more her industry seems a meaningless activity and an end in itself.

Mrs Clennam's function as a working woman cannot be properly understood without considering her attitude to work itself. She has had a puritan upbringing, and religious fervour extends to her public role as the head of a firm, as well as her private role as wife and "mother." Indeed, it is difficult to detach her private self from her professional self (it is not without reason that Blandois, who introduces himself to her as a client, becomes the instrument of unveiling her past). To her, work is not a productive activity engaged in to enrich her life, but an alternative to self-indulgence, a rigorous means of holding at bay the gross temptations of the flesh. Financial success to her indicates heavenly approval, the sign of moral election. As far as professional

drive is concerned, puritan zeal agrees well with nineteenth-century mercantilism. Grahame Smith, in Dickens, Money and Society, recognizes the sympathy between these two social forces in their combined influence on the hero of Little Dorrit: "Arthur is the child of nineteenth-century greed and materialism, cloaked under a veil of religious repression."[2] Ross H. Dabney comments on the human implications of the struggle for material wealth and power in Little Dorrit:

> Dickens enforces a vision of pride of place, self-will, inertia, anxiety, and concealment as dominating motives in the governing and propertied classes of this civilization; he is essentially concerned with the moral implications of these motives rather than the economic and political effects on the community.[3]

This moral preoccupation of the novelist necessarily ties Mrs Clennam's business dealings with personal feelings. However, her exaggerated claims for work result in self-delusion; she is unable to separate her sense of personal injury, and private vindictiveness, from the objective demands of business.

Mrs Clennam's self-delusion is projected externally in a fictitious image of herself that determines her relationship with everyone who comes close to her. For the majority of successful women in Dickens's novels, the fictions they create cater to their secret desire to be weak and womanly; striking exceptions to this rule are Mrs Clennam and Sally Brass. Being a puritan, Mrs Clennam luxuriates in the fiction of self-denial and righteousness. Shortly after her marriage, she feels deeply humiliated when she discovers that her husband has a mistress who has borne him a child, whom he much prefers to the stern woman forced on him by his dictatorial uncle. This affront to her suppressed womanhood is the real injury she suffers, but she denies the truth of sexual jealousy

and substitutes a fiction of impersonal retribution, in which her own interest has no share: "'Was it my wrong I remembered? Mine! I was but a servant and a minister. What power could I have over them, but that they were bound in the bonds of their sin, and delivered to me'" (LD, p. 844). She sends her husband to China to work and atone for his sin; she immerses herself solely in work to validate her judgement of him; and she consigns Arthur to a life of gloom, work and exile like his father's to expiate the sin of his illegitimate birth. Work, then, becomes an excuse for the suppression of her sexuality, just as she uses her sex as an excuse for her failure in business. To Blandois, she assumes a pose: "My sex disqualifies me . . . from taking a responsible part in the business, even if I had the ability; and therefore, Mr Flintwich combines my interest with his own, and conducts it" (p. 404). But we know this is a pretence. In the words of Jeremiah, who is openly critical of her, Mrs Clennam is "More courageous than ninety men in a hundred" (p. 398). It is her personality, uncongenial to confidence, that disqualifies her for the increasingly competitive business of the age. The fiction with which she rules her life is the secret of her power over those whom she dominates. Arthur's parents believe in her righteousness and perish under it. Affery Flintwich, puzzled by the mystery that surrounds her, still believes in her moral rigour and cowers before the old lady until such time as the fiction crumbles through Blandois's account and Mrs Clennam's own confession. Jeremiah and Blandois never believe in her fiction and are quite fearless of her. In fact, their power over her consists in their knowledge of the fragility of her pretence.

Next in the line of prosperity is Madame Mantalini. Critics, on the whole, give no favourable impression of her and often make no

distinction between her and her frivolous husband. In Steven Marcus's comment on "The Mantalinis" they seem identical:

> The Mantalinis, those charming incompetents, conduct themselves with "'destructive extravagance'" . . . ; their mode of life is catastrophically prodigal, and they suffer its consequences. Their improvidence is represented as a mode of conduct which seems to them worldly and fashionable, as is the profligacy of Bray, which leads him into cunning and self-serving behaviour, or the misguided generosity of Lord Frederick, which finally destroys him.[4]

I think it a mistake to include Mme Mantalini with the three male incompetents; her character deserves closer study. Michael Slater is fair to her, in the sense that he makes a simple, objective statement about her, but he says no more than is obvious to the most simple-minded reader: "Madame Mantalini is, apparently, a successful businesswoman, but she is fatally undermined by her emotional dependence on her spendthrift husband."[5] She is undeniably a successful businesswoman. Where Mrs Clennam inherits her business and derives her power from perpetuating a system imposed upon her and accepted unquestioningly, Mme Mantalini, to all appearance, has built up her own establishment and seems perfectly capable of building it up again, at the point where the novelist leaves her to mend her fortune off-stage.

Mme Mantalini knows precisely the tastes of her fashionable clientele, and how to exploit them to serve her own interest. Her home, which is also her business establishment, is ostentatiously grand to attract aristocratic customers. Readers are introduced to it when Kate Nickleby presents herself there to seek employment:

> A liveried footman opened the door, and . . . ushered them through a handsome hall, and up a spacious staircase, into the show saloon, which comprised two spacious drawingrooms . . . with sofas, . . . carpet, . . . cheval glasses, . . . and rich furniture of various descriptions, which were profusely displayed. (NN, p. 189)

Apart from conveying a general impression of prosperity, the interior decor calls attention to Mme Mantalini's business interest and testifies to her knowledge of the art of advertisement:

> Madame Mantalini's show-rooms were on the first floor, a fact which was notified to the nobility and the gentry by the casual exhibition near the handsomely curtained windows of two or three elegant bonnets of the newest fashion, and some costly garments in the most approved taste. (p. 189)

The pointed sarcasm that Dickens aims at the English aristocracy's fascination with continental ways, particularly French and Italian, and their disdain of customs closer home, underlines her practical sagacity, at the same time as it invites the reader's amusement at the expense of such pretentions. Mr Mantalini's "name was originally Muntle; but it had been converted, by an easy transition, into Mantalini: the lady rightly considering that an English appellation would be of serious injury to the business" (p. 190). The exterior glitter of the dressmaker's establishment hides other, less innocent, instances of deceit. Much of her means, efforts and imagination are directed to win clients; she is under no compulsion to attract and retain her employees. With perfectly rational, though by no means humane, unconcern for the welfare of her employees, she is well prepared to exploit their subservient position. The principle of successful business is to coerce maximum output for the least cost of production, and the only reason for setting it aside is a humanitarian one. Mme Mantalini's negligence towards her employees is a slur on her humanity, but it makes her an equal in commercial entrepreneurship with any male counterpart. She recognizes the resources available to her as an employer and she uses them to her best advantage.

The working conditions for the young women employed in

dressmaking are far from comfortable. The space where they work is confined, dark and airless. Accompanying Kate,

> Madame Mantalini led the way down a flight of stairs, and through a passage, where were a number of young women employed in sewing, cutting out, making up, altering, and various other processes known only to those who are cunning in the arts of millinery and dress-making. It was a close room with a skylight, and as dull and quiet as a room could be. (NN, p. 278)

The contrast with the bright and spacious rooms above makes it obvious that Mme Mantalini can improve the working conditions if she wants, but she chooses not to. She is equally negligent about the human needs of her subordinates, when setting down the terms and conditions of employment, and drives a hard bargain. She expects regular attendance of twelve hours a day, and additional time when needed: "our hours are from nine to nine, with extra work when we're very full of business, for which I allow overtime" (p. 192). Payment is meagre at best, and the employee has no guarantee of a fixed amount: "I should think your wages would average from five to seven shillings a week; but I can't give you any certain information on that point until I see what you can do" (p. 192). We see in Mme Mantalini an employer conscious of her privileges, dictating her own terms and withholding commitment on her part.

Mme Mantalini's weakness is Mr Mantalini, or rather, her infatuation for him. He is a clever, glib-tongued, sensual fortune-hunter experienced in the art of sponging on wealthy women: "he had married on his whiskers, upon which property he had previously subsisted in a genteel manner for some years, and which he had recently improved after patient cultivation by the addition of a moustache" (p. 190). He shamelessly spends his wife's earnings on frivolous pursuits and incurs heavy debts which lead to her impoverishment: "his share in the labours

of the business being at present confined to spending the money, and occasionally when that ran short, driving to Mr Ralph Nickleby to procure discount--at a percentage--for the customer's bills" (p. 190). Mme Mantalini is clever herself and by no means blind to his faults; yet, her passion rules her, against her better judgement, where he is concerned. Her enslavement seems hardest to overcome, precisely because she loves him <u>despite</u> his faults. As Ralph Nickleby declares contemptuously, "love . . . is fleeting enough; though that which has its sole root in the admiration of a whiskered face like that of yonder baboon, perhaps lasts longer, as it originates in the greater blindness and is fed by vanity" (p. 514).

Mr Mantalini does flatter his wife's vanity; so does he contribute to a fiction that she cherishes fondly within her--and that is the pretence of feminine dependence and feminine charm. She likes to make believe that Mantalini takes care of her, though she is in fact the stronger of the two. This farce becomes apparent as soon as the couple enter the scene of the novel. Mme Mantalini quaintly reminds her husband of his duty to discipline an erring domestic, as if the task is beyond her:

> 'My dear,' said Madame, 'that is entirely your fault.'
> 'My fault, my heart's joy?'
> 'Certainly,' returned the lady; 'what can you expect, dearest, if you will not correct the man?' (p. 191)

Mr Mantalini joyfully enters into the fiction, and promises that the poor footman "shall be horse-whipped till he cries out demnebly" (p. 191). It is a comically transparent show of male strength on his part, and admiring confidence in his power, on the part of his wife. That this is not a mere fabrication to enhance the prestige of her husband before

company becomes evident when we see Mme Mantalini indulge in the same kind of fiction in private. The rapture with which she submits to being "the demdest little fascinator in all the world" (p. 227) and "a pure and angelic rattlesnake" (p. 511) shows that she is too deeply engrossed in her fiction to use it merely for appearance. This is the peculiarity of Mme Mantalini's personality; she is strong and capable, but instead of taking pride in her real accomplishments, she looks for gratification towards an illusion of beauty and fragility that is as hollow as it is discreditable. However, her personal nature in no way detracts from her tangible achievement as a working woman. This is simply a secret deference to the social image of womanhood, which she shares as inevitably as she belongs to her time in history. It would be a harmless fantasy, except that Mantalini gains power over her by reinforcing the fiction. Then it becomes necessary for her to part with it, and so she does. At the brink of ruin, she recovers her senses and discards her fiction, as she renounces her husband and forms an alliance with Miss Knag, her forewoman, to circumvent the law that denies a married woman's right to her property. The nature of this compact is not made explicit, but it may be assumed that it will help Mme Mantalini to salvage at least a portion of her capital with which she can start anew. And with her ability, and released from her parasitical husband, there is no reason to doubt that she will succeed.

Engaged in her own business and prosperous, though on a smaller scale than Mme Mantalini, is Mrs Jarley. She leads a nomadic life in caravans and provides entertainment to the humbler levels of society, by displaying wax representations of historical figures, to the accompaniment of dramatic accounts of their lives. She judges others by their

occupation ("What line are you in?" she asks Little Nell--OCS, p. 272) and is prodigiously proud of her own. She keeps her distance from cheaper entertainments, which are not "calm and classical" (pp. 271-72) like her own shows. When Nell, ignorant of the implication of her question, asks Mrs Jarley if she knows the Punch show, the latter shrieks: "'Know 'em, child! . . . Know them! . . . Do I look as if I know'd 'em, does the caravan look as if it know'd 'em?'" (p. 265). It is characteristic of Mrs Jarley to include everyone and everything in her company within the genial sphere of her own self-importance. She is a fit person to entertain others, as she indulges herself in a thoroughly epicurean enjoyment of life, but what saves her from the selfish gluttony of Mrs Corney of Oliver Twist is the fact that she loves to share the plenitude of her board with others about her. When, hungry and tired, Nell comes upon her, Mrs Jarley is in the middle of her comfortable repast:

> The tea-things, including a bottle of rather suspicious character and a cold knuckle of ham, were set forth upon a drum, covered with a white napkin; and there, as if at the most convenient round-table in all the world, sat this roving lady, taking her tea and enjoying the prospect. (OCS, p. 263)

This air of complete ease and absorption in the act of eating and her oblivion of all besides, marks Mrs Jarley as uniquely capable of enjoying the good things of life. Whatever displeasure the reader feels in her smug self-satisfaction is quickly dispelled when she observes that Nell is hungry, and offers her "the tea-tray, the bread and butter, the knuckle of ham, and in short everything of which she had partaken herself" (p. 266). For, as Mabell Smith remarks, "It is easy for the empty to feel for the hungry, for the fasting to sympathize with the famishing; but it is on the very back of a full meal . . . that Mrs Jarley recognizes

the aspect and the claims of want."[6] According to Slater's categories, Mrs Jarley is clearly a Good Provider; in Smith's opinion, she is a Sympathizer: "The people of the world may be divided into two great classes, the Monopolizers and the Sympathizers, and Mrs Jarley is one of the last mentioned."[7]

The success of the waxworks is easily traced to Mrs Jarley's business ability. Her imagination lends life to her collection of lifeless figures and her remarkable knowledge of the public draws the maximum number of people to see them. She understands that the soul of art is illusion, and what her waxworks lack in fact, she amply provides with fiction. She has a genius for advertisement which, even if it is a trifle crude, is in keeping with the unsophisticated audience she means to attract. Who cares about the truth of advertisement? It exists for effect--and Mrs Jarley's elaborate scheme of advertising rouses a great deal of curiosity in the sleepy town where "Nothing seemed to be going on but the clocks" (p. 280). Dickens devotes more than half a page here to describe the dullness of this town; undoubtedly to emphasize the extent of her success. She carries scrolls of canvas with inscriptions such as "Jarley is the delight of the Nobility and Gentry," and "The Royal Family are the Patrons of Jarley." Besides these, she has handbills with prose and poetry, with parodies of popular melodies and "dialogues between the Emperor of China and an oyster, or the Archbishop of Canterbury and a dissenter on the subject of church-rates, but all having the same moral, namely, that the reader must make haste to Jarley's"--with the added allure that "children and servents were admitted at half-price" (p. 271). There can be no doubt that Dickens means these wild flights of her imagination to stir some fun at her expense but, at the same time, they

testify to an amazingly agile mind. Mrs Jarley makes allowance for disparity in taste and accommodates all kinds with a facility that is both amusing and admirable. She instructs her people "that the pathetic effusions should find their way to all private houses and tradespeople" and the parodies should be "circulated only among the lawyers' clerks and choice spirits of the place" (p. 286). At the show, she shows proper deference to the respectability of Miss Monflathers's boarding-school,

> by altering the face and costume of Mr Grimaldi as clown to represent Mr Lindley Murray as he appeared when engaged in the composition of his English Grammar, and turning a murderess of great renown into Mrs Hannah More--both of which likenesses were admitted by Miss Monflathers. (OCS, p. 288)

The joke here is on the schoolmistress; Mrs Jarley's ingenuity expresses itself with the brilliancy of a conjuror. The reader forgives her this piece of innocent deception, as he or she overlooks smilingly her deviousness, when she bribes the cook of the boarding-school to know the number of pupils it has: "there's twenty-six of 'em, as I was told by the cook when I asked her a question or two and put her on the free-list" (p. 307). It causes no harm and is a part of her achievement.

There is a great deal of fiction in Mrs Jarley's art and a little fiction in Mrs Jarley's life. She is a strong woman who leads the caravan, does all the talking and makes others listen. Yet, as in the case of Mme Mantalini, Mrs Jarley's success is at odds with her self-image of a delicate woman, a fantasy that she nurtures lovingly. To Nell's incredulous ears, the plump and hearty Mrs Jarley confesses a lack of appetite, and an inability to sleep: "You don't know what it is to be low in your feelings. You always have your appetites, too, and what a comfort that is" (p. 270). She allows the same mystery and fiction to

pervade the "suspicious bottle" whose contents find their way surreptitiously into her tea, because she is "troubled with a lowness in that respect which requires a constant stimulant" (p. 270). Consistent with this same fiction, she consults with George, her assistant, every time she has to make a decision, as when she decides to take on Nell and her grandfather; it is a pretence and no more, for her own wish prevails each time. It is her way of coming to terms with the prevalent notion of womanhood, with all its traits of suppressed physicality, dependence and weakness. With a clear insight, Mrs Jarley can see the distinction between life and art--truth belongs to life and fiction to art. While she would never admit to her audience that her wax figures are not life-like, she confesses to Nell: "I won't go so far as to say, that, as it is, I've seen wax-work quite like life, but I've certainly seen some life that was exactly like wax-work" (p. 272). Does she mean the life of women who deny their true selves and project the social image of femininity, purged of all the vital drives? Nell herself is pale and delicate, but can Dickens also have in mind his ideal creations, Rose Maylie and Lucie Mannette, while he juxtaposes the image of "life like wax-work" against the vibrating, flesh-and-blood figure of Mrs Jarley?

Sally Brass is different from Mme Mantalini and Mrs Jarley in that she does not try to cloak her strength under any imaginary weakness. She is proud of her independence. Sally's father deeply regretted "that his daughter could not take out an attorney's certificate and hold a place upon the roll" (OCS, p. 348); and a pity it is, because her personality is better suited to the law than that of her brother, Sampson Brass. Officially, she cannot be Sampson's legal partner, but in practice she is "the prop and pillar of his business" (p. 348). She is

skillful in conducting legal business and thorough in every detail of its execution: "she could ingross, fair-copy, fill up printed forms with perfect accuracy, and in short transact any ordinary duty of the office down to pouncing a skin of parchment or mending a pen" (p. 321). She is more independent and self-assertive than Sampson Brass, "who was at heart in great fear of his sister" (p. 323). When he employs Dick Swiveller at his client's insistence, he earns the following contemptuous rebuke from Sally: "if every one of your clients is to force us to keep a clerk, whether we want to or not, you had better leave off business, strike yourself off the roll, and get taken in execution as soon as you can" (p. 322). She is not simply learned in the law, but knows how to apply it to suit her purpose, "tracing it attentively through all the slippery and eel-like crawlings in which it commonly pursues its way" (p. 321). In appearance, Sally is "of a gaunt and bony figure" and "carried upon her upper lip certain reddish demonstrations, which, if imagination had been assisted by her attire, might have been mistaken for a beard" (pp. 320-21). Dickens is harshly critical of Sally Brass, in whose portrayal he combines his hatred of the law (which we encounter again and again in his fiction, particularly in Bleak House and David Copperfield) and of the female infringing on the male domain of business. With Sally he is sarcastic and ruthless; she is unattractive, cruel and immoral. Yet, her living force is such that she eludes the derogatory bias of her creator to compel the reader's interest. The description of her masculine bearing opens up an aspect of Sally's personality that is quite refreshing in its unassuming ease: "Mr Swiveller gradually came to look upon her as her brother Sampson did, and as he would have looked upon any other clerk" (p. 349). She shares the office with the men in a true

spirit of camaraderie and makes them feel perfectly at home through her disdain of feminine affectations.

In fact, there is good reason for Sally to be dissatisfied with her sex and to try to conduct herself in a manner that will counter this basic biological fact about herself. In her situation, sex is a basis for discrimination and is the only barrier between her and professional recognition. In private life, too, her experience has taught her that sexuality can be a trap. Dickens makes covert references to a past affair between her and Sampson's client, Daniel Quilp, out of which unlawful union was born the child she keeps as a servant and treats with shocking cruelty. Initially, he wanted to make this information explicit, but changed his mind because of the moral sensibilities of his reading public. Michael Slater says of this deletion:

> The surviving proofs and manuscripts of The Old Curiosity Shop reveal that Dickens originally intended to make it clear that the Marchioness was Sally's natural child and to hint strongly that the father was Quilp. But then, realizing the difficulties readers would have in accepting that a child of such hideous heredity should turn out a heroine, he suppressed the passage in which Sally explicitly asserts the Marchioness to be her child.[8]

About the verisimilitude of such a connection, Edwin Charles, author of "Keys to the Drood Mystery," is emphatic in his confirmation:

> the annals of our criminal courts teem with examples of ferocious cruelty of mothers to their children. Sally Brass was of that mould of woman who would not scruple to visit upon the head of her unfortunate offspring--a perpetual reminder of her lapse--all the chagrin and contempt she felt for her own weakness.[9]

Thus, while Mme Mantalini and Mrs Jarley use fiction to reinforce the illusion of feminine susceptibility, Sally uses her fictionalizing power to deny her sexuality. And she is more successful than they, because as

a lawyer she knows that reality corresponds only to proven fact and is, consequently, sure of her ground. When, at the Notary's office, she is threatened with the discovery of the child, though for a different reason, she is momentarily disturbed, "with a sudden flush overspreading her features" (p. 602). However, she soon recovers her composure with a certainty that only she, with a lawyer's knowledge of society, can assume: "Prove it--will you, that's all" (p. 603). "The law has been her nurse" (p. 348), not in vain; Sally triumphantly asserts the validity of legal truth over actual truth.

Turning from Sally Brass to Mrs Lupin is like emerging from the former's "pinched and meagre" (OCS, p. 351) underground kitchen to the bright, warm, fireside of the latter. Women innkeepers, whom Dickens calls landladies, occupy a favoured place in his fiction. This is principally because of their characteristic function as providers of food and drink, an act closely associated in Dickens's imagination with the very concept of giving. They may differ in age and personality: Mrs Lupin, mistress of the Blue Dragon, is relatively young and attractive, while Miss Abbey Potterson, mistress of the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters, is elderly, rather stern and authoritative; yet, they are similar in the discharge of their social role. They are strong, capable, kind, supportive of good and active against evil--in short, very bulwarks of positive strength in a world of conflict.

Whereas the Victorian and Dickensian middle-class home is a secluded place, protected from and ignoring the harsh realities of life, the public-houses offer more active support for the weary and the wayward. Miss Potterson is almost maternal in her relationship with the waterside men who come to 'the Porters' for a drink. She combines strict discipline

with genuine concern for their welfare. She reminds them with unmistakable finality when they "are all due" (OMF, p. 109), that is, when they must all go home, and "a man must have drunk himself mad drunk indeed if he thought he could contest a point with her" (p. 106). Like an impartial parent, she punishes both Gaffer and Riderhood by denying them entrance to her house, when she has no means of ascertaining the real offender in the mysterious murder of John Harmon. So important for the community is Miss Potterson's approval that when Lizzie Hexam finds proof of her father's innocence, she sends it to her as constituting a form of authority over and influence on public opinion, no less powerful than the law. In fact, she is on the side of law and helps the Inspector in the detection of crime. The waterside area is a miserable place--poverty-stricken, rough and dangerous--but in it, Miss Potterson provides a haven of order, cleanliness and security, the elements ordinarily looked for in domestic homes but absent from the dwellings of the waterside men. So Miss Potterson, in her working capacity and as a public figure, enacts a typically female role--a combination of wife and mother--and her inn serves as a collective home for those incapable of making a home for themselves. The landlady at her best is an improved, because independent, version of the angel in the house.

Mrs Lupin lives at a more respectable and prosperous level of society; hence, her role is not as authoritative as Miss Potterson's, but she does function as a repository of information and a channel of communication among people. Nothing happens in the little village near Salisbury that is not known in the Blue Dragon. Mrs Lupin is the secret ally of old Mr Chuzzlewit, and "has played duenna for some weeks" (p. 889) to Mary Graham, when Pecksniff's interest in her becomes evident. She

has a gentle, almost submissive, personality but in her unobtrusive way, she is strong and knows what is right.

In fact, Mrs Lupin's apparent docility is a fiction that acts as a cover for her more active role. In the beginning of the novel, when Mr Chuzzlewit angrily forbids her to send for a doctor, she is not deterred by fear of him from doing what she knows to be right and sends for the "apothecary . . . upon her own responsibility" (MC, p. 78). Yet, when Mr Pecksniff arrives, she assumes a role of dependence on him and need for his advice; though, in truth, he does nothing more than repeat her words: "here again, though the statement was Mrs Lupin's and not Mr Pecksniff's, Mr Pecksniff made it his own and consoled her with it" (p. 86). The pretence suffices to establish the proper scale of importance, restores Mrs Lupin's sense of security in having a male authority to guide her, and invites trust in her deference to the social system. In the long run, her outward meekness excludes suspicion and makes her an effective ally of Mr Chuzzlewit.

Landladies who let lodgings are not in such harmony with their world as landladies who keep inns. Mrs Todgers is a well-meaning woman harrassed daily by the conflicting demands of her lodgers; in Slater's words, she is one of the "comic figures of pathos,"[10] in Dickens's fiction. Mrs Crupp is a clever and dishonest woman who looks upon all young bachelors as a species particularly vulnerable, to be exploited at pleasure. She is perhaps, as George Gissing suggests, more representative of her kind:

> Then, typical of a very large class indeed, comes Mrs Crupp, who "does for" David Copperfield in his chambers . . . enough to say that she stands for the baser kind of London landlady--a phrase which speaks volumes. Some day it will cause laughter,

> indeed, and something else, to think that young men beginning life as students, and what not, should have fallen, as a matter of course, into the hands of Mrs Crupp.[12]

If the peculiar misfortune of students is to fall prey to Mrs Crupp, the especial blessing for "commercial gentlemen" is to be waited on by the patient and tireless Mrs Todgers. She presides over an establishment that puts her under a great deal of strain: "The gravy alone, is enough to add twenty years to one's age, I assure you" (MC, p. 189). Her lodgers use the threat of quitting her house to force their will upon her: "Mrs Todgers, this day week we part, in consequence of the cheese" (p. 190). The lofty, ceremonious manner of these men, contrasted with the triviality of their demands, creates a mock-heroic effect that amuses the reader; but to the simple-minded Mrs Todgers, the threat is serious. She is a business-woman, interested in the profit of her establishment and she cannot risk displeasing any lodger and losing his "eighteen shillings a week" (p. 168).

Mrs Todgers herself has not elicited much comment from critics, but a great deal has been said about her establishment. Dorothy Van Ghent offers an almost symbolic interpretation of the place, in an article called "The Dickens World: A View from Todgers's." In the context of this interpretation, Mrs Todgers's role as the frantic manageress of a rather chaotic boarding-house takes on an enhanced value. According to Van Ghent:

> Todgers's is, in a sense, all of London, as London is the whole world; for it is impossible for the reader to dissociate these mazes of a squalid metropolitan district from the Coketown "labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets"; or from the "wildernesses" of semi-fashionable Park Lane, with their be-crutched and scrofulous tenements "that looked like the last result of the great mansions' breeding in-and-in," where Arthur Clennam goes looking for Miss Wade; or from the maggoty honeycomb of Tom All Alone's.[13]

Contained within these myriad, unhealthy spaces is the "submerged hysteria" of helpless suffering and what "The Todgers world requires [is] an act of redemption . . . in the charity of the uncherished."[14] With all her bustling inefficiency, Mrs Todgers sustains life in a place that looks and smells like death: "It had not been papered or painted, hadn't Todgers's, within the memory of man. It was very black, begrimed, and mouldy" (MC, p. 182). Her solicitude for men who have not the slightest consideration for her has the redeeming selflessness of "the charity of the uncherished." Besides, in using her effective, though often dishonest, tact, she performs the motherly function of keeping peace in the house and averting violence. When Moddle threatens to become desperate over Jinkins's apparent success with Mercy, Mrs Todgers pacifies him by asserting that he is the "gentleman that I can much less bear to part with than I could with Mr Jinkins" (p. 227)--though later, in confidence with Charity and Mercy, she declares: "Of all the ridiculous young fellows that I ever had to deal with . . . that is the most ridiculous and unreasonable" (p. 228). In spite of all the good that Mrs Todgers does, she is not free from regret that her work exacts a heavy toll on her personal gratification. She suffers from the secret delusion that she was once beautiful; she shows the girls "an oval miniature" of herself as she was when young, and is disappointed when they still see a "speaking likeness" between it and her older self: "but I hardly thought you would have known it, my loves" (MC, p. 189). Like the typical Victorian woman, Mrs Todgers measures her worth in terms of sexual attractiveness and is unappreciative of her own real contribution to society.

Mrs Crupp's character is the exact reverse of Mrs Todgers's, who allows herself to be stretched in all directions to please others.

For fear of failing to do things "with ampial satisfaction to [her] own feelings" (DC, p. 471), Mrs Crupp elects not to satisfy at all. She chooses at all times not to answer David's bell, not to cook the dishes he intends to serve to his guests, and to make his bed "at five o'clock in the afternoon--which I do still think an uncomfortable arrangement" (p. 472). She tyrannizes over David with the help of two imaginary weapons. One she calls "the spazzums" (p. 446), a mysterious illness that comes upon her whenever David disagrees with her: "If I hesitated, she was taken with that wonderful disorder which was always lying in ambush in her system, ready, at the shortest notice, to prey upon her vitals" (p. 471). The other is her pretension of maternal protectiveness towards David; when he decides to take her lodgings, she thanks Heaven she has "now found summun to care for!" (p. 415). Far from taking care of him, she takes every opportunity to rob him. David is paralyzed into unprotesting silence between fear of arousing her "spazzums" and solicitude for her "motherly" sentiments. Mrs Crupp is a vulgar woman with none of the emotional conflicts of the relatively sensitive characters --Mme Mantalini and Mrs Jarley, for example. She needs no fiction to reinforce her preferred self-image; but her fictions work admirably well in manipulating her victims, that is, her lodgers. She considers men, unprotected by female members of the family, ideal victims for robbery, and so when Miss Betsy Trotwood appears in David's apartments and puts an end to her tyranny, Mrs Crupp opposes her strongly "on an abstract question (the propriety of chambers being inhabited by the gentler sex)" (p. 572). Mrs Crupp has good reason to be apprehensive of David's aunt, because, whereas David is too timorous to attack his landlady's fantasy, Miss Trotwood is not. She deflates Mrs Crupp's fiction by telling her

squarely that "she smelt of [David's] brandy" (p. 572) and at once vanquishes her.

In a world where women normally occupy a passive position, businesswomen in Dickens's fiction have an active role to play. They enjoy the advantages of an independent income without suffering the indignity of working under an employer. They interact with other people in society on equal terms, feeling neither psychological humiliation like governesses and lady companions, nor physical degradation and hardship like women who labour manually to make a living. Businesswomen not only control their own lives, they have power over others. Some use that power to do good to others, some to injure them, and some are indifferent. However, kind or cruel, Good Provider or Depriver, all these women are interesting and complex characters.

CHAPTER II

GENTEEL EMPLOYMENT

For the genteel woman without a fortune or a family, the opportunities to provide for herself respectably were very limited in Victorian England, at least as represented in Dickens's fiction. In fact, scanning his novels, one can find only three options--namely, schoolmistress, governess and lady companion. However, the respectability of these occupations is of a questionable sort, as will become evident in this chapter through the analysis of various characters. As mentioned before, this class of working women is harrowed by the deepest conflicts which, in extreme cases, lead to severe distortions of personality. As in any other employment, their situation is one of humiliating subordination, and we perceive in their lives the inevitable conflict between gentility and enforced submission to superiors (who are actually moral inferiors), and reactions of various degrees to that disharmony. Dickens's tone in the treatment of the disparity between these women's delicacy of birth and upbringing and the undignified position to which they are subjected changes with different characters: work is seen to have a grim effect on Miss Murdstone and Miss Monflathers, comic in Mrs General, pathetic in Miss Peecher and vindictive in Miss Wade and Rosa Dartle. I mean to show in this chapter that even though Dickens is predominantly satirical in depicting these characters, there is nevertheless present an undercurrent of sympathetic contemplation and, consequently, a serious critique of society's attitude towards them. It

will be difficult to trace a continuous line of argument to support this statement, and in defence of this supposition we must recall that Dickens's mode of social criticism, particularly where women are concerned, is of a covert, rather than of an overt, kind. What we can do is arrange the fragments of ideas to be derived through the analysis of each character in this category, that is, women engaged in a genteel occupation, and see whether a recognizable form emerges, regardless of the discontinuity of the lines.

Broadly speaking, we may discern three major aspects in Dickens's treatment of this subject: the sympathetic view of young, beautiful, docile women like Kate Nickleby, Ruth Pinch and Miss Peecher; the satiric view of hardened, elderly women like Mrs General, Miss Monflathers and Miss Murdstone; and the psychological examination of revengeful and self-destructive women like Miss Wade and Rosa Dartle. I find a connection among these apparently disparate views, and will attempt to trace a line of psychological development from the first group to the second and the third. Can the young, vulnerable and victimized governesses grow into the harsh, predatory elderly ones? We do not know for certain; Dickens leaves the young women young, at the end of his novels, and takes up the elderly, when they are already so. The exceptions--Kate Nickleby, Ruth Pinch and Madeline Bray--are rescued while they are still young and grow old amidst the favoured circumstances of marriage and domesticity. They cannot contribute to any definitive view of the working woman because, as heroines and quasi-heroines, they are predestined for the role of ideal women and are given a taste of working for a living only so that the blessings of love and marriage come all the sweeter. If we do not make too much of personality differences

(though Dickens obviously means his naive readers to view his characters as individuals; so that a Ruth Pinch, even if she were left to die a spinster, would never degenerate into a Mrs General), we may perceive in the limitations, the hopelessness and the indignities associated with the occupations of these women, the embittering process that can lead to a reversal of the scheme of victimization. Thus, the evolution of the aggressively manipulating elderly governess may be a necessary adjustment to a social system that leaves no alternative between the predator and the prey. In Miss Wade and Rosa Dartle, we see an extreme form of rigidity that prevents them from conforming, and internalizes their conflict to cause severe distortion of their personalities. So, where the elderly governesses are openly aggressive, there is a deep, smouldering fire within the rebellious young, who wish to destroy others but destroy themselves instead. Trapped in a hopelessly confined situation which does not allow the expression, let alone the fulfilment of, her basic human and sexual needs, the best-intentioned and most warm-hearted woman must survive either by learning to play society's game according to society's own rules, or else be consumed by the raging passions of her suppressed self.

I will examine in order the three occupations of the schoolmistress, the governess and the lady companion. This seems a rational progression because the governess forms a common link between the other two, being an educator like the schoolmistress but residing in an inferior position with her employers like the lady companion. In the words of Philip Collins, "In Dickens's novels, many women, young or otherwise, turn to teaching when for some reason or other their financial position has become precarious."[1] He even emphasizes the limited choice of

profession for women from a genteel background: "Teaching or governessing was, indeed, one of the few occupations open to a middle-class girl or woman who needed to make a living."[2] As Philip Collins generally brings out in Dickens and Education, Dickens's attitude towards the existing educational institutions was a negative one. He believed that the educational mode prevalent during his time suppressed the natural curiosities of young minds and curbed moral growth through the imposition of ruthless discipline and arid intellectual cramming, instead of furnishing the training necessary to prepare them for future adult roles in society. When applied to the education of girls, whose ideal role was as home-maker, Dickens found these principles not only restrictive and useless, but trivial to the point of mockery. Girls' schools persistently appear in his fiction as objects of ridicule. Michael Slater points out that Dickens's attitude in this matter was directly derived from his personal experience when his mother tried unsuccessfully to improve her family's declining income by setting up a school for girls. Slater mentions that Elizabeth Dickens "figures twice in the fragmentary autobiography written by Dickens in the late 1840s and reprinted in part by Forster--once as comically pathetic in her attempt to help the family finances by starting a school."[3] Later, discussing "Mrs Micawber's Boarding Establishment for Young Ladies," Slater asserts that here "Elizabeth's ill-fated school . . . makes the first of its two appearances in Dickens's fiction."[4] In fact, there are more than two such appearances in Dickens's fiction. In The Old Curiosity Shop, Dick Swiveller's first love, Sophy Wackles, keeps a girls' school with the help of her mother and sisters:

> The several duties of instruction in this establishment were thus discharged. English grammar, composition, geography, and the use of the dumb-bells, by Miss Melissa Wackles; writing, arithmetic, dancing, music, and general fascination, by Miss Sophy Wackles; the art of needle-work, marking, and samplery, by Miss Jane Wackles; corporal punishment, fasting, and other tortures and terrors, by Mrs Wackles. (OCS, p. 111)

In Our Mutual Friend, there is more than a hint of Mrs Wilfer's attempt to start a school for girls and to popularize it with the help of her milkman. When her husband apologizes to her for having taken a lodger ("as we have let our first floor so well, and as we have now no place in which you could teach pupils even if pupils--"), Mrs Wilfer counters his insinuation with the strong declaration that "The milkman said he knew of two young ladies of the highest respectability who were in search of a suitable establishment, and he took a card." Dickens's unmistakable enjoyment of the joke finds expression in Bella Wilfer's quiet rejoinder: "But we never heard any more of it, ma" (OMF, p. 78). But, there is more to Dickens's critical view of girls' schools than the arbitrary querulousness of a personal joke.

The majority of the schools in Dickens's fiction are wrong from their very inception, being motivated by the desire to earn income without excessive exertion, rather than by any concern to actually benefit the pupils. The three examples already mentioned in the last paragraph are frankly conceived with this object in view, and there are many others in Dickens's novels--for example, Mrs Pipchin's school in Dombey and Son, which has allowed her "to eke out a tolerable sufficient living since her husband's demise" (DS, p. 161), and Mr Squeers's school in Nicholas Nickleby, which is the cover for a lucrative business to relieve unnatural parents of their unwanted children. Dickens's dissatisfaction with girls' schools in particular is that they fail to prepare girls for their future

role as home-makers.[5] It may not be quite beside the point to note the views of two thinkers contemporary with Dickens on the subject of women's education, who were also critical of prevalent standards, but for reasons essentially contrary to Dickens's own. They are John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft, two notable Victorian champions of women's freedom. On the issue of training girls to be competent housekeepers, one that Dickens considers to be of prime importance, J. S. Mill is scathingly ironic:

> Women who read, much more women who write, are, in the existing constitution of things, a contradiction and a disturbing element: and it was wrong to bring women up with any acquirements but those of an odalisque, or of a domestic servant.[6]

Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is a general plea for allowing woman the opportunity to grow as a total human being, free from a systematic exercise of retardation, which alone fits her for the limited female role prescribed by society. Thus, where Dickens sees the failure of the educational system of his time in its inability to prepare young people, particularly girls, for their future social obligations, Mary Wollstonecraft finds fault with the then current educational mode because it does precisely that:

> Into this error [that women were born to please men] men have, probably, been led by viewing education in a false light; not considering it as the first step to form a being advancing gradually towards perfection; but only as a preparation for life. On this sensual error, for I must call it so, has the false system of female manners been reared, which robs the whole sex of its dignity, and classes the brown and fair with the smiling flowers that only adorn the land.[7]

These comments about the nature of education in Victorian England may seem a digression, irrelevant to the question of the specific role of Dickens's fictional schoolmistresses. But such a discussion not only

throws light upon the expectations to which these women must fit their functions; it also points clearly to the dichotomy present in that society between the domestic woman and the working woman. So, the observations of J. S. Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft also become meaningful in the broader context of this thesis as a whole.

Besides being trivial and useless, girls' schools, in Dickens's estimation, do positive harm in perpetrating class consciousness and snobbery; and this point brings us directly to the personage of Miss Monflathers. Philip Collins states that "Miss Monflathers . . . recalls the Sketches by Boz point about useless feminine 'accomplishments', and adds another note characteristic of the private schoolmistress--a snobbish gentility."[8] George Gissing reiterates the view that such educators contribute to the maintenance of a status quo particularly agreeable to the upper classes: "One outcome of a society wrapped in ancient peace was that dignified and powerful lady, Miss Monflathers, to whom were entrusted the minds of the growing generation, that they might be shaped and polished in the approved pattern."[9] When little Nell visits the school to convey Mrs Jarley's compliments to Miss Monflathers, she is reduced to tears by the latter's cruel allusions to her poverty and alleged "wickedness"; she has to listen while the schoolmistress lays down the rules for little children to follow:

> 'The little busy bee,' said Miss Monflathers, drawing herself up, 'is applicable only to genteel children.
>
> "In books, or work, or healthful play"
>
> is quite right as far as they are concerned; and the work means painting on velvet, fancy needle-work, or embroidery. In . . . the case of all poor people's children, we should read it thus:
>
> "In work, work, work. In work alway
> Let my first years be past."' (OCS, p. 309)

Michael Slater perceives in this behaviour not a personality type, but a characteristic example of a social pattern:

> Schoolmistresses are, of course, ridiculous ex officio, like . . . Miss Monflathers who berates Little Nell for being 'a wax-work child': intense snobbery and hysterical prudishness seem to be their characteristic qualities rather than any interest in matters educational.[10]

Not only is Miss Monflathers unkind to Nell, she is doubly so to Miss Edwards, the pupil-teacher in her establishment, and reveals the plight of a young woman at the start of her teaching profession. Miss Edwards is an ordinary Victorian girl; in fact, a better sort--gentle and sensitive, she could easily have been a heroine in one of Dickens's novels, instead of a minor character. However, as a pupil-teacher, she is subjected to cruel persecution by the entire school, to remind her of her difference from others and to make her conscious of her humble position in life:

> This young lady, being motherless and poor, was apprenticed at the school--taught for nothing--teaching others what she learnt, for nothing--boarded for nothing--lodged for nothing--and set down and rated as something immeasurably less than nothing, by all the dwellers in the house. (OCS, p. 311)

One can notice a hierarchy of importance among the teachers in Miss Monflathers's establishment. The pupil-teacher is undeniably at the bottom; teachers, with their training completed, are better off: "The teachers were infinitely superior, for they had paid to go to school in their time, and were paid now" (OCS, p. 311). The subordinate teachers vying for Miss Monflathers's favour show that a gradation of value exists between the destitute humility of Miss Edwards and the regal authority of the headmistress, Miss Monflathers. In the existence of this hierarchy, one can already recognize the embittering and distorting nature of social

discrimination. Even the character of Miss Monflathers herself, who is not meant to arouse the slightest touch of approval in the reader, should be looked at in the context of the life she leads. Slater refers to her as "one quite vicious caricature"[11] and no wonder. With the stamp of the schoolmistress upon her, she is fit for no life but that of teaching. She has to deny the very human need for family and a sexual relationship by setting firmly on the foreground of her existence the fiction that the human male species does not exist; her maid makes sure that no man enters the house she lives in: "nothing in the shape of a man--no, not even a milkman, was suffered, without special licence, to pass that gate . . . . More obdurate than gate of adamant or brass, this gate of Miss Monflathers's frowned on all mankind" (OCS, p. 307). I do not wish to underplay the fact that Miss Monflathers is clearly not a sympathetic figure to Dickens; yet, if we bear in mind the frustrations of her life, which result in her taking a perverse pleasure in punishing people in her power, her example will serve to corroborate the ill effects of the teaching profession on a character presented far more sympathetically--Miss Peecher. In The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens shows what schoolmistresses, as instruments of Podsnappery, can do to society. In Our Mutual Friend, he shows what society does to the schoolmistress.

Miss Peecher is a key figure in my examination of the genteel occupations and their effects on the women obliged to pursue them. Dickens introduces her in terms indicative of a hearty approval of her womanly qualities: "Small, shining, neat, methodical, and buxom was Miss Peecher; cherry-cheeked and tuneful of voice. A little pincushion, a little housewife, a little book, a little work-box, a little set of table and weights and measures, and a little woman, all in one" (OMF, p. 268).

Admiration soon gives way, however, to mild ridicule. Her neat and methodical ways are carried to an extreme, casting a comic light on her surroundings, her actions, her relationship with her student, Mary Anne, and even on her dreams and desires. Not only can she "write a little essay on any subject, exactly a slate long, beginning at the left-hand top of one side and ending at the right-hand bottom of the other," she would have answered a proposal of marriage "in a complete little essay on the theme exactly a slate long" (OMF, p. 268). Classroom practices pervade her life and give rise to mannerisms that are ludicrous in the open sunshine:

> The pupil had been, in her state of pupilage, so imbued with the class-custom of stretching out an arm as if to hail a cab or omnibus, whenever she found she had an observation on hand to offer to Miss Peecher, that she often did it in their domestic relations. (OMF, p. 269)

Dickens maintains this flippant style throughout his treatment of Miss Peecher, but his surface portrayal is transparent enough to draw the reader's attention to the deep pathos of her situation. His emphasis on her neat and precise ways is a sad reflection on the oppressive limitations of her life. Her house, with "its little windows like the eyes in needles, and its little doors like the covers of school-books" (OMF, p. 392), symbolizes the hopelessly constricted dimensions of her world. She is a schoolmistress; the only gentleman who will ever consider marrying her is a schoolmaster, and Miss Peecher's heart is filled to the brim with love for Mr Bradley Headstone, who does not return it. Pointing to the absence of an alternative person who might have attached the pretty schoolmistress to himself does not mean underrating her existing love for the schoolmaster. This simply confirms the painful truth of her life,

that the combined effects of gentility and her occupation have diminished her possibilities for self-fulfillment to the utmost degree. There is more evidence in the novel about matrimonial liaisons between schoolmasters and schoolmistresses. As Charley Hexam completes his education, he makes plans for the future: "I hope, before many years are out, to succeed the master in my present school, and the mistress being a single woman, though some years older than I am, I might even marry her" (OMF, p. 781). What strikes one in this observation is the complacent assumption that the schoolmistress under consideration will accept Hexam's proposal as a matter of course, the choice being entirely on his side. What is even more significant is the strong probability that she will do so, since she is older than he and has not yet found a husband. A schoolmaster may let his fancy wander, and if it settles on a woman socially inferior to him, he is still free to offer marriage as a grand gesture of condescension--as Bradley Headstone does to Lizzie Hexam. A schoolmistress can only wait for a gentleman. Although this restriction applies to all Victorian ladies, it does not lead to isolation in all cases, because a lady who does not work is easily accepted as a gentleman's bride. This is an unfair state of affairs and Dickens is surely aware of it, even though he parodies the situation through Mary Anne's interest in Charley Hexam:

> Miss Peecher's favourite pupil . . . sufficiently divined the state of Miss Peecher's affections to feel it necessary that she herself should love young Charley Hexam. So, there was a double palpitation among the double stocks and double wall-flowers, when the master and the boy looked over the little gate. (OMF, pp. 268-69)

There must be something wrong in a social system where Miss Peecher, "a little housewife . . . and a little woman, all in one" (OMF, p. 268)

cannot be a wife, simply because she is a schoolmistress.

Not only is Miss Peecher denied fulfillment, she is also deprived of the comfort of self-expression. She is a woman; so she cannot propose, even to be refused; neither can she declare her love. Hidden beneath her shining countenance is a bitter struggle of self-suppression. Viewed from this perspective, Miss Peecher's insistence on rules is no longer seen comically as a natural inclination on her part, but as a self-imposed discipline to enable her to accept the realities of her life. However, the truth is too painful for a straightforward acceptance, and her mind takes recourse in evasions and deceptions. She builds for herself and puts her faith in the fiction of the orderliness of life, just as she follows the rules of grammar, an exercise in the ordering of language, in her profession. With pathetic self-delusion, she thinks she can change the world by imposing upon it the rules of academic discipline, and dismiss what is undesirable as a grammatical error. When Mary Anne signals the possibility of Mr Headstone's becoming attracted to Charley Hexam's sister, with her innocent remark that "They say she's very handsome," Miss Peecher has no shield against this threatening piece of information, except the fragile one of deception and her precise knowledge of grammar:

> 'Oh, Mary Anne, Mary Anne!' returned Miss Peecher, slightly colouring and shaking her head, a little out of humour; 'how often have I told you not to use that vague expression, not to speak in that general way? When you say <u>they</u> say, what do you mean? Part of speech They?' (<u>OMF</u>, pp. 269-70)

Mary Anne is forced to admit that only Charley Hexam has made the claim, but this bit of grammatical correction does not nullify Lizzie's beauty nor Bradley Headstone's infatuation with her. Nor is Miss Peecher unaware

of the failure of her fiction.

So self-repression gives way to self-torment and this is where I see a distinct link between the warm-hearted Miss Peecher and the fiercely destructive Miss Wade and Rosa Dartle. On the fateful day when Bradley Headstone meets Lizzie Hexam, Mary Anne reports to her teacher that he has returned and has locked his door. This seemingly trivial incident convinces Miss Peecher that she has no more hope. Her response is startling and revealing at the same time: "Miss Peecher repressed a sigh as she gathered her work together for bed, and transfixed that part of her dress where her heart would have been if she had had the dress on, with a sharp, sharp needle" (OMF, p. 283). Till now, Dickens has given us no evidence of anger, passion or destructiveness in Miss Peecher. Cherry-cheeked and tuneful of voice, she is an embodiment of gentle, womanly virtues. What has turned her love into violence? It is illuminating that Dickens uses the same metaphor of the needle to express both the limitations of her existence and the angry, self-destructive response to the end of all her hopes. Suffering has a sharpening effect, as we learn in the case of Rosa Dartle in David Copperfield, who, according to James Steerforth, "has worn herself away by constant sharpening. She is all edge" (DC, p. 352). Miss Peecher's restrictive, repressive experience has honed her emotions to a thin point--the image dominating her life, the needle, has only to be inverted and it becomes a fit instrument to express the injury her social situation has done to her.

Turning now from the barrenness of the schoolmistress's position to that of the governess, we find a situation of active persecution and humiliation. This is necessarily so, because the governess lives with her employers and is subject to their whims and pleasures, besides being

constantly made aware of her subordinate position in the household. In Martin Chuzzlewit, when Mr Pecksniff and his daughters visit Ruth Pinch at her employer's residence, they are announced in a way that clearly defines the young woman's status there:

> 'Visitors for Miss Pinch!' said the footman. He must have been an ingenious young man, for he said it very cleverly: with a nice discrimination between the cold respect with which he would have announced visitors to the family, and the warm personal interest with which he would have announced visitors to the cook. (MC, p. 192)

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the gentility of these professions is of a questionable kind; the quotation above sufficiently indicates that the governess's place is not much above that of a domestic servant. In Nicholas Nickleby, the hero learns the sad history of the girl he secretly admires, Madeline Bray, from his employer, Mr Cheeryble. Among other occupations, she has also worked as a governess, and that has proved to be the worst indignity of all. She has worked

> for two long years, toiling by day and often too by night, working at the needle, the pencil and the pen, and submitting, as a daily governess, to such caprices and indignities as women (with daughters too) too often love to inflict upon their sex when they serve in such capacities, as though in jealousy of the superior intelligence which they are necessitated to employ. (NN, p. 691)

The nature of the indignities is not made clear here, but we are given an example in the dishonourable discharge of Ruth Pinch in the presence of her brother. Her failure as a governess has been in her inability to ensure that her pupil "should be choice in her expressions, genteel in her deportment, as becomes her station in life, and politely distant to her inferiors in society" (MC, pp. 645-46). The pupil's father is shocked to hear her address Miss Pinch "as a beggar," not because it

points to her inferior position, but because this verbal expression lacks finesse; it is a "low, coarse, despicable expression!" (MC, pp. 645-46). And yet, the parents also feign surprise at their daughter's lack of respect for her teacher. Tom Pinch sadly, but proudly, reminds them "that no man can expect his children to respect what he degrades" (MC, p. 646).

Michael Slater comments on the place of the governess in Victorian life and literature, generally, and also in Dickens's fiction:

> The miserably underpaid, abused and exploited governess was, of course, a stock figure of pathos in Victorian life and literature and Dickens himself contributed to establishing her as such in his description of the trials undergone as governesses by Madeline Bray and Ruth Pinch (though he also showed, in Miss Wade's embittered autobiography, something of the difficulties an ill-conditioned governess could cause to her employers).[12]

Miss Wade's character, twisted and tormented as it is, is worth a close study. Part of the chapter headed "The History of a Self-Tormentor" is sub-titled "Distorted Vision"; we may take this to mean that Dickens categorically denies the validity of Miss Wade's observations about her life. But, given the general background of the governess's position described by Dickens himself, elsewhere, the reader may be excused for raising an eyebrow at the succession of amiable employers in her experience; at the assumption of an apologetic tone by her aristocratic mistress for her wrong choice of words ("I am unfortunate in using a word which may convey a meaning . . . quite opposite to my intention," LD, p. 730); at the absence of family opposition to the intended marriage of a member of the family to a governess, when Dickens's fiction abounds with examples of the snobbery of the Victorian upper classes; at the cloying sweetness of disposition of every individual Miss Wade comes across. To

me, there is something suspect in this unlikely accumulation of blessings upon the head of Miss Wade, which she chooses to turn into curses. I will not attempt to deny that her responses to the various situations of her life are abnormal and hysterically exaggerated, amounting to what we would call, in modern terms, paranoia. And yet there is some truth in what she sees; we may even find confirmation of many of her beliefs in the experiences of other characters in Dickens's fiction. At the outset of her autobiography, Miss Wade makes a claim for her superior understanding:

> I have the misfortune of not being a fool. From a very early age I have detected what those about me thought they hid from me. If I could have been habitually imposed upon, instead of habitually discerning the truth, I might have lived as smoothly as most fools do. (LD, p. 725)

And her mind does penetrate to the essence of things. Like Esther Summerson, Miss Wade seems to have been an illegitimate child: "I learned that I had no grandmother and no recognised relation. I carried the light of that information both into my past and into my future" (LD, p. 728). Esther has felt the difference of her birth through a systematic deprivation of the pleasures common to childhood: "There were holidays at school on other birthdays--none on mine. There were rejoicings at home on other birthdays, as I knew from what I heard the girls relate to one another--there was none on mine" (BH, p. 64). What is presented as real slight in Esther's life is dismissed as imagined persecution in Miss Wade's. Can Miss Wade be entirely deluded when she perceives pity and condescension in the kindness of people brought up to regard the illegitimate child as an evil freak of nature? In Dombey and Son, Dickens has shown that beauty can be bought in marriage as surely as

it can be bought in the streets; then why should Miss Wade's uneasy feeling that her fiancé was making a purchase of her beauty be considered an erroneous assumption?

Miss Wade is acutely conscious of her subordinate position as governess, and lets no one forget it. In this, she is like Rosa Dartle. She knows that she has no rights as an employee: "The mother . . . made a show of behaving to me with great delicacy. . . . but I knew very well that it was her way of petting the knowledge that she was my Mistress, and might have behaved differently to her servant if it had been her fancy" (LD, p. 728). That her employer has the power of choice over Miss Wade is undeniable; and this is precisely the element of subordination that she rebels against. Mr Gowan does not treat her any better than others, but she knows that to him she is not a governess but simply an individual and as such he has no power over her; so she can accept him as a companion. Thus, Miss Wade's perception does not seem mistaken in itself. She errs in reacting violently to the truth about her situation, something that a more complacent person would have accepted as a fact of life.

Distorted as Miss Wade's character is, she is not unsexed by the conflicts in her experiences as a governess. Characteristically, her sexual impulses are destructive in nature. She is jealous of Pet Meagles and hires the ruthless Rigaud to keep an eye on her and Gowan. Her suppressed maternal instincts search out a creature as close to her in personality as a real child would have been:

> I found a girl, in various circumstances of whose position there was a singular likeness to my own, and in whose character I was interested and pleased to see much of the rising against

> swollen patronage and selfishness, calling themselves kindness, protection, benevolence, and other fine names, which I have described as inherent in my nature. (LD, p. 734)

Perpetuation of one's self through a younger image of that same self and the guiding of a child through one's chosen path to whatever one conceives truth to be are two of the basic motivations of parenthood. When Miss Wade persuades Tattycoram to leave the Meagleses, the latter becomes her surrogate child. However, Miss Wade being a psychologically distorted character, her maternal instinct shows itself more in its fierce, possessive aspect than in a nurturing form. Tattycoram flees from her oppressive presence and Miss Wade is left alone, an extreme, visible effect of the inward battle of gentility and social subordination.

Mrs General is a lady of great adaptability; having good knowledge of the proprieties in society, she is able to project the desired image and profits well accordingly. As mentioned before, she is the predatory sort of governess (as opposed to the young, victimized kind) and skillfully uses the arts of propriety to hunt down her prey. As an educator she has no real qualification; her appeal is a vague claim to social perfection; in fact, so indeterminate are her merits that anyone can write her a testimonial:

> one venerable archdeacon even shed tears in recording his testimony to her perfections (described to him by persons on whom he could rely) though he had never had the honour and moral gratification of setting eyes on Mrs General in all his life. (LD, p. 500)

Dickens explicitly points to the vacuity of her mind: "If her eyes had no expression, it was probably because they had nothing to express. If she had few wrinkles, it was because her mind had never traced its name or any other inscription on her face" (LD, p. 503). But this is no

inadequacy in a governess, when rich parents expect them only to instruct their daughters in the precepts of Podsnappary. Mrs General is ideally suited to the role, for "In that formation of hers, she dipped the smallest brushes into the largest pots, and varnished the surface of every object that came under consideration" (LD, p. 503).

Mrs General pacifies both her genteel upbringing and her feminine susceptibility, which might have been outraged by the base necessity of working for a living, by creating a fiction of herself as a paragon of grace. She bestows her attentions and instructions as a favour, the question of remuneration being unmentionable: "I cannot . . . put a price upon services which it is a pleasure to me to render if I can render them spontaneously, but which I could not render in mere return for any consideration" (LD, pp. 501-2). Besides, she reminds Mr Dorrit, "I am not, as I hope you are aware, a governess--" (p. 501), and agrees to become a part of his household "on terms of perfect equality, as a companion, protector, Mentor, and friend" (p. 502). It is a graceful fiction that Mr Dorrit gallantly upholds; not the least because he suffers from an inferiority complex arising out of his past experience as a prisoner of the Marshalsea, and lacks the moral strength to counter the authority of Mrs General's "Prunes and Prism" (p. 557).

Miss Wade suffers because she insists on breaking the surface decorum of social behaviour; Mrs General thrives precisely because she puts all her faith in the surface gloss of existence. From her artifice arise her victories:

> as it was a part either of the native dignity or of the artificial policy of Mrs General (but certainly one or the other) to comport herself as if she were much more sought than seeking, the widower pursued Mrs General until he prevailed upon her to form his daughter's mind and manners. (LD, p. 500)

Her disdain of money does not prevent her from enriching herself, for with impeccable tact, she states: "I cannot object . . . to Mr Dorrit's inquiring, in confidence of my friends here, what amount they have been accustomed, at quarterly intervals, to pay to my credit at my bankers" (LD, p. 502). She also reminds Mr Dorrit to add a third more to the sum, because he has two daughters. The art of Mrs General is so effective and her fiction of the gracious, accomplished lady is so powerful that her employer almost succumbs to it. The governess is about to catch the biggest prey of all, a rich husband, when Mr Dorrit has a breakdown and Mrs General's carefully constructed world crumbles to pieces.

The position of a lady companion is not very different from that of a governess. The situation is one of dependence and humiliation. We shall examine the experiences of two characters--the timid and passive Kate Nickleby, who is rescued by a brother to pass the rest of her days in domestic happiness, and the rebellious and self-destructive Rosa Dartle, who illustrates the distorting effects of the profession on an intelligent, hyper-sensitive mind. We perceive the same pattern of treatment here as in the case of the timid Ruth Pinch and the rebellious Miss Wade. In the first case, the manner of the employers is described disapprovingly. In the second, the attitude is reversed, and the employee's angry response is presented as an abnormal reaction. But we must remember that the situation is identical in both cases. The difference is in points of view--a naive acceptance or sufferance and a conscious rejection. That Kate Nickleby is an example of the womanly ideal proves that Dickens conceives of her suffering as the result of real persecution, and not imagined injuries, as may be supposed in the case of a psychologically maladjusted character like Rosa Dartle or Miss Wade.

Kate Nickleby becomes the paid companion of Mrs Wittiterly, a lady whose soul is too large for her body. Her susceptibility is a matter of pride to her and to her husband, and Kate's duty is to enliven her fragile spirits. In the discharge of this very difficult work, Kate's feelings have to be constantly disregarded: "Mrs Wittiterly . . . being in low spirits . . . of course expected her companion (else wherefore had she board and salary?) to be in the best spirits possible" (NN, p. 436). After an unpleasant evening with a couple of unwelcome admirers, Kate complains about its wearing effect on her and, in doing so, shocks Mrs Wittiterly, who finds the circumstance "very odd." Dickens's ironic comment on her surprise shows deep commiseration with the degraded lady companion: "And certainly, when one comes to think of it, it was very odd that anything should have disturbed a companion. A steam-engine, or other ingenious piece of mechanism out of order, would have been nothing to it" (NN, p. 438). Ruth Pinch is treated almost like a servant; Kate's very humanity seems to be beyond the comprehension of her employer. When it dawns on Mrs Wittiterly that Sir Mulberry Hawk and his friend Lord Verisopht are attracted to Kate and that they visit the employer only to see her paid companion and revel in her helpless endurance of their attentions, she is angry at this slight to herself and the presumption of Kate to engage the attentions of her honoured guests. She rebukes the latter for her "forward behaviour to the gentlemen" and thus awakes all the pent-up emotions in the girl. In indignant, rather melodramatic terms, she reviews the injuries she has received in Mrs Wittiterly's presence:

> 'Is it possible!' cried Kate, 'that any one of my own sex can have sat by, and not have seen the misery these men have caused me! Is it possible that you can have avoided seeing, that these

> libertines . . . have had but one object in introducing themselves here, and that the furtherance of their designs upon a friendless, helpless girl, who, without this humiliating confession, might have hoped to receive from one so much her senior something like womanly aid and sympathy?' (NN, p. 445)

Michael Slater states that Dickens's "imagination is infallibly stirred . . . by the succouring by women of women who really are victims of male brutality, or of male-dominated society"[13] and so Kate's experience as a lady companion is seen as an outrage to the dictates of nature and the sacred bond of universal sisterhood that Dickens wished to hold up as an ideal.

Rosa Dartle, Mrs Steerforth's companion in David Copperfield, is intelligent and acutely perceptive. Like Miss Wade, she is painfully aware of her inferior position in relation to the members of the family and uses every opportunity to impress the fact upon others. She makes a great show of deriving her opinions from her employers, implying that they have a claim to her mind, as well as to her services. David is made uncomfortable by her repeated assertions, "I want to be put right, if I am wrong" (DC, p. 351), but he is also aware that this is Miss Dartle's way of expressing her difference of view--something that the Steerforths, mother and son, are incapable of understanding. David informs the reader that "Her own views of every question, and her correction of everything that was said to which she was opposed, Miss Dartle insinuated in this way" (p. 351). One opinion of her superiors that she particularly wishes to adopt, or pretends to do so, is that about the insensibility of the lower class of people: "Are they really animals and clods, and beings of another order? I want to know so much" (p. 352). The reason she wants to learn this lesson exceptionally well becomes clear when she confronts

Emily, the unfortunate girl who captivates Rosa Dartle's idol, Steerforth.

Although Rosa emphatically declares to David, "Oh dear me, don't suppose that I think anything!" (DC, p. 492), she can and does think independently. She knows that there are no real differences in humanity imposed by social structures; all human beings feel the same emotions and suffer the same pains. But it has been her experience as paid companion to realize that to Mrs Steerforth and her son, her own emotions are of no consequence. We come to know that Steerforth had loved her once and then set her aside; it was easily done, because she was a paid companion. Her feelings did not exist: "Since then, I have been a mere disfigured piece of furniture between you both; having no eyes, no ears, no feelings, no remembrances" (p. 872). She carries a visible brand marking Steerforth's cruel treatment of her in the disfiguring scar on her face.

The bitter lesson that Rosa Dartle learns, the power of social disparity, she uses to revenge herself upon Emily. She cries again and again that Emily does not suffer from Steerforth's betrayal. She advises her to go back to her people "whom your money will console. When it's all gone, you can believe, and trust, and love again, you know!" This, because Emily belongs to a much lower social order than herself. However, the more she emphasizes the distance between her own gentility and Emily's working-class status, between her own respectability as a chaste maiden and Emily's disgrace as the fallen woman, the clearer it becomes that in their relationship to Steerforth, they are identical. Just as Emily is an object of temporary fascination for Steerforth, so Rosa had once "descended . . . into a doll, a trifle for the occupation of an idle hour, to be dropped, and taken up, and trifled with, as the inconstant

humour took him" (p. 872). Her bitterness is the greater because Emily's attraction is strong enough to make Steerforth forget, for a time, his duty to his mother and to his social position. Rosa, the paid companion, has been coolly discarded, because the social barrier between them is inviolable. Yet, the attraction of a fisherman's niece has become "cause of division between lady-mother and gentleman-son" (p. 788); a defeat that rankles in the bosom of Rosa Dartle. In Emily, Rosa sees an image of herself and revenges herself on her lifelong degradation at the hands of the Steerforths. Emily then becomes a surrogate-self on whom Rosa showers all the bitterness of her humiliation from class-consciousness and professional dependence. The encounter between these two women becomes a means of release for Rosa from her suppressed, artificial self. She tells Emily, "drop your pretty mask" (p. 791), and in so doing, discards her own mask. When we see her next, she faces Mrs Steerforth in her true colours--angry, contemptuous, accusing--no longer the submissive companion, eager to learn her lessons from her superiors. She reveals to Mrs Steerforth with all the fury of her own wasted life, that she has been the cause of her son's destruction: "Now, . . . is your pride appeased, you madwoman? Now has he made atonement to you--with his life!" (p. 870). Rosa Dartle is another example of the violent psychological conflict between gentility on the one hand and social subordination on the other. What might have been a healthy love for Steerforth, and for children if she had any, creeps in a distorted form into a strange relationship with Mrs Steerforth, whom she torments at one time and comforts like a baby at another. With David looking on, "She had then taken the impassive figure in her arms, and, still upon her knees, was weeping over it, kissing it, calling to it, rocking it to and fro upon her bosom like a child, and

trying every means to rouse the dormant senses" (p. 873). Her natural impulses to fulfill herself as a dignified human being and as a woman being suppressed and twisted by her position in society, Rosa Dartle emerges as a frightening figure of waste.

When Dickens created the early characters--embodiments of extreme forms of virtue and vice--he probably did not mean to portray their experiences in a light that might mingle the two. Our Mutual Friend is his last complete novel. By then, he may have perceived more critically the distorting function of social and professional roles in the life of working women. In the character of Miss Peecher he offers the missing link between the docile young women who are victimized by society and the hardened destructive women who try to harm others and themselves, and thereby delineates a process of degeneration, either internal or external, by which genteel women change to survive in the struggle to work for a living and to fulfill themselves in their personal lives.

CHAPTER III

MANUAL EMPLOYMENT

It is necessary at the very beginning to define the meaning that has been applied to the title of this chapter, to fit the rather varied, even amorphous, category of work discussed here. Manual labour is involved in many different occupations; I wish to distinguish between skilled, specialized labour (the kind of work examined in the next chapter, under the heading of "Free-Lance Service," and which is relatively in high demand), and unskilled, non-specialized labour which has little demand and has to be adjusted to changing circumstances. The word "employment" is not always used in a strictly legal sense to imply work in the service of an employer and paid for as per contract (although there are examples of such employment offered here), but in a very general sense, almost analogous to "occupation." This has been done, partially, to accommodate some characters whose type of work is difficult to categorize within a rigid system of classification; but also to link the various characters in this group to an underlying theme, related to a specific social problem.

The majority of people in Dickens's fictional world, as in the real world at large, who need to make a living for themselves lack special skills and privileges. They have to accept any kind of work, precisely because they offer no specialized service. For this group, and necessarily so because of its size, the paucity of opportunities is alarming. Consequently, this chapter emphasizes the difficulty, almost

the impossibility, of unskilled women earning their living by any available manual occupation. The desperate attempts of these women lead to the final collapse of the principle of living by honest labour and result in two of the worst states of human degradation--prostitution for younger women, and the workhouse for older ones. One concern of this discussion will be to show how fragile is the barrier that separates impoverished, but respectable, working women like Kate Nickleby of Nicholas Nickleby, Lizzie Hexam of Our Mutual Friend and Little Emily of David Copperfield, from the "fallen women" like Martha of David Copperfield, Alice Brown of Dombey and Son and some other nameless prostitutes in Dickens's fiction. If businesswomen belong to the category of working women who have the maximum control over their own lives, women struggling to live by unskilled manual labour have the minimum control over theirs. They are obliged to move hither and thither, as necessity drives them, like old Betty Higden of Our Mutual Friend, who flees like a maniac from the nightmare of state-charity.

If we look in the lives of women engaged in genteel employment, discussed in the previous chapter, for the feature which distinguishes them from those in search of manual employment, the most striking is the focus on psychological stress in the former and on physical distress in the latter. Governesses and lady-companions, to all appearance, have decent board and lodging; their pain is in mental and emotional maladjustment. In the case of Little Nell of The Old Curiosity Shop, or Kate Nickleby as sempstress or Betty Higden, physical hardship is prominently underscored. There is an urgency, a desperation, associated with their struggle for survival that is not present in the efforts of women in any other category of work to be found in Dickens's novels.

This compulsive, almost hunted, quality of their lives brings them very close, indeed, to the social outcasts whose existence Victorian propriety tried to deny. The lives of the characters presented here show a pattern of social backsliding and reveal the horrors to which a woman can descend, when she loses her foothold on the social ladder. It also becomes clear that poverty and dishonour are not beyond the pale for ordinary people; the lowest haunts of degradation are as surely connected to the social hierarchy as the highest bastions of honour. Through this group of women, Dickens shows the tension between moral principle--namely, the dignity of labour--and social truth--namely, exploitation of labour on the one hand and the lack of respectable labour on the other. The idea of work is submerged under a process of victimization, where the destitute have no human claim and exist merely to satisfy others, or simply because they are not dead.

Needlework has traditionally been regarded as a female occupation and it pervades Dickens's fiction as an activity for women, either as private diversion or as the means of earning a living. Most young girls brought up within a tolerably ordered domestic setting know the rudiments of needlecraft, and so, if and when the need arises to support themselves, women almost invariably seek employment as sempstresses --whether in decorative dress-making and millinery, to adorn rich women for social frivolity, or in the grim setting of an undertaker's shop, to shroud a human corpse on its journey to the grave. I call this form of labour unskilled and unspecialized, not because it actually requires no skill, but because it is practised so extensively among women that it is not considered as training specialized enough for a profession. To illustrate this point, I wish to distinguish between the sewing skill of

Kate Nickleby or Lizzie Hexam and that of Amy Dorrit of Little Dorrit who, consciously and with an eye to the future, takes lessons from a milliner imprisoned in the Marshalsea: "The milliner . . . found her the most patient and earnest of pupils, and made her a cunning work-woman in course of time" (LD, p. 113). Amy's competence in her chosen work is so great that she never even considers adopting any other profession. Kate and Lizzie possess average skills in needlecraft, not greater and not less than their ability in other matters, and they move on to alternative situations before they both marry, and one ceases to work for a living. Miss Knag of Nicholas Nickleby is probably a highly skilled sempstress herself, through her long training under Mme Mantalini, but her position as an employee is so well established that, notwithstanding her specialization, she must be considered in the category of manual employment.

Mme Mantalini's establishment is a prosperous one and allows employees to rise in the business through diligence and proper deference to the mistress. Miss Knag becomes a useful assistant of Mme Mantalini by flattering her, as well as by supervising the work of her own subordinates. About her Steven Marcus says: "There is Miss Knag, whose relation to her patron and employer, Mme Mantalini, is an interesting variation of the Kenwigses to Lillyvick,"[1] a relationship of sycophancy motivated by self-interest, just as Lillyvick's niece and her family stifle him with attention to prevent his marrying and cutting them off from his inheritance. As in Miss Monflathers's boarding school, one senses the presence of a hierarchy in the dress-maker's shop, descending from the proprietor at the top to the workers at the bottom, with the forewoman as a go-between. Miss Knag occupies the middle ground with

enormous flexibility: "Miss Knag bestowed a reverential smile upon Madame Mantalini, which she dexterously transformed into a gracious one for Kate" (NN, p. 180). Miss Knag's obsequiousness towards Mme Mantalini is parallelled by the admiring crowd of young women who hover around her like satellites. They take the cue from the forewoman to torment Kate after the episode where a customer refuses to be served by a "fright" (p. 295), and asks for "that pretty young creature we saw yesterday"--meaning Kate! "The young ladies took their tone from Miss Knag--she being the chief--they all got up a laugh without a moment's delay, and nodded their heads a little, and smiled sarcastically to each other" (p. 297). This blind submission to superior authority, at the cost of personal integrity, appears indispensable to success in a world that knows no concept of basic human rights for all and easily accepts the ascendency of the powerful. Kate Nickleby fails to make her way in the dressmaking business because she cannot quell her pride sufficiently to become a doting protégé of Miss Knag.

Kate Nickleby is of genteel birth and upbringing, and so her humiliation at Mme Mantalini's is emphasized more than her physical suffering, but Dickens shows himself well aware of the physical hardships involved in such labour. Mention has already been made in Chapter I of the poor working conditions in Mme Mantalini's house; and we also find the novelist ruminating very compassionately upon the practice which robs poor girls of their health and youth merely to afford the rich accessories to their beauty:

> At this early hour many sickly girls, whose business, like that of the poor worm, is to produce with patient toil the finery that bedecks the thoughtless and luxurious, traverse our streets, making towards the scene of their daily labour,

> and catching, as if by stealth, in their hurried walk, the only gasp of wholesome air and glimpse of sunlight which cheers their monotonous existence during the long train of hours that make a working day. (NN, p. 274)

This is an accurate portrayal of life for poorer women in Victorian England, as Michael Slater informs us in "Dickens's Tract for the Times": "In the towns women struggled to feed their children and themselves--and, often, their unemployed husbands too--by working fifteen hours a day at shirt-sewing for a few farthings a shirt."[2] Even such wretched toil for so many long hours does not ensure survival; and what happens when this kind of employment fails to provide the income necessary for sustenance? Prospects are bleak, and so, in Slater's words, "Escape from this harsh poverty lay only in crime, death or--for many the most terrible refuge of all--the workhouse."[3] Dickens does not actually show us a sempstress driven by despair to suicide, crime or the workhouse, but he offers enough information to allow us to deduce what he leaves unsaid.

Besides Kate Nickleby, there is Emily in David Copperfield, who works as a sempstress for Mr Omer. He requires only shrouds but testifies that she "has as elegant a taste in the dress-making business . . . I don't believe there's a Duchess in England can touch her" (DC, p. 362). And there is Lizzie Hexam in Our Mutual Friend, who works for a while as a sempstress: "she was always a fair needlewoman, and she keeps the stockroom of a seaman's outfitter" (OMF, p. 271). We shall hear more about Lizzie Hexam in connection with factory work; but let us consider the fortunes of Kate and Emily. Kate is a heroine; Dickens subjects her to temporary social persecution in order to gather readers' sympathy around her, but he allows no permanent harm to come to her. She is saved by a loving brother, who in turn gains an easy livelihood under the chance

patronage of the Cheeryble brothers. If we imagine a hypothetical situation where Nicholas does not reappear to take charge of his mother and sister, it is easy to picture what might have happened to Kate. She suffers greater humiliation from Mrs Wittiterly than from Miss Knag; she is pursued by a scheming rake, Sir Mulberry Hawk; she is further pushed into the company of this man by her uncle, who uses her to entice his dupe, Lord Frederick Verisopht; and she is unfortunate in having a mother who, though well-intentioned, is credulous enough to believe that Sir Mulberry intends to marry Kate and who frustrates all her efforts to avoid him. Kate is thoroughly unfitted to accommodate herself to the indignities associated with earning a living. How long then, with the pressing need to provide for herself and her mother and betrayed by those who should protect her, before she succumbs to the attentions of Sir Mulberry Hawk and consents to become a gentleman's mistress? In The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens gives his readers a glimpse of a courtesan--a woman in a carriage:

> There was but one lady . . . who sat alone in a handsome carriage, while two young men in dashing clothes, who had just dismounted from it, talked and laughed loudly at a little distance, appearing to forget her quite. There were many ladies all around, but they turned their backs, or looked another way, or at the two young men (not unfavourably at them), and left her to herself. She motioned away a gipsy-woman urgent to tell her fortune, saying that it was told already and had been for some years. (OCS, pp. 213-14)

Only a dramatic reversal of circumstances prevents Kate's fortune from following that of this woman. Emily, too--a classic example of a poor girl seduced by a gentleman and afterwards discarded--is saved from a lifetime of degradation by the amazing devotion of an uncle who searches for her across land and sea, and knows no rest until he finds her, finally,

in the home of her friend, Martha. Martha is a prostitute and, therefore, the only person to whom Emily can return without the fear of tainting her with her own dishonour. To this humble refuge Rosa Dartle traces Emily and threatens her with exposure. Rosa gives Emily to understand that she will be persecuted as long as she tries to lead a respectable life, but that she is free to live unmolested if she accepts the life of a prostitute:

> If you live here tomorrow, I'll have your story and your character proclaimed on the common stair. . . . If, leaving here, you seek any refuge in this town in any character but your true one (which you are welcome to bear, without molestation from me), the same service shall be done to you, if I hear of your retreat. (DC, p. 790)

In fact, Emily is faced with the same prospect before Martha succeeds in finding her ("She had know'd of her bitter knowledge wheer to watch and what to do," p. 796), as we learn from Mr Peggotty's account to David:

> A'most the moment as she lighted heer, all so desolate, she found (as she believed) a friend; a decent woman as spoke to her about the needle-work as she had been brought up to do, about finding plenty of it fur her . . . . When my child . . . stood upon the brink of more than I can say or think on--Martha, trew to her promise, saved her. (DC, p. 796)

Promise of employment as a sempstress serves to lure unsuspecting women into the most dishonourable of occupations. So, when we envision the alternative of a hard-hearted uncle who refuses to forgive Emily or simply fails to find her, what recourse does she have left but to join Martha in her trade?

Factory work, as opposed to traditional needle-work, was a relatively new occupation for women in Victorian England and has a limited representation in Dickens's fiction. Michael Slater mentions that although Dickens believed that women should be

> fully occupied with their own families and domestic duties . . . he also recognized that many women who did not marry would have to earn their living and that, in the lower ranks of society, wives and mothers often had to be the breadwinners, the men being unemployed,--the women workers in some East End lead-mills, for example.[4]

His novel Hard Times is exclusively preoccupied with the nature of life in an industrial city, Coketown, but in Our Mutual Friend we also have the example of Lizzie Hexam, who works in a paper-mill after she leaves the home of Jenny Wren, where she is driven to distraction by the attentions of two rival men. However, before we examine Lizzie's experience as a factory worker, it may not be irrelevant to digress a little and consider Dickens's general views on Industrialization, especially because the last example is an idealized one and not truly representative of industrial life as Dickens knew it to be.

Like any intelligent and sensitive thinker, Dickens was at first impressed by the technological progress resulting from industrialization, but later appalled by the dehumanizing forces accompanying it. As K. J. Fielding and Anne Smith remark in an article called "Hard Times and Factory Controversy," there is a noticeable change of attitude between Bleak House and Hard Times:

> With Bleak House (1852-53) it is reasonable to read the novel as showing that, between the old order and the new, Dickens's sympathies are with the Ironmaster. Yet in Hard Times, barely a year later, we can see him revealing a much greater awareness of what this new order was to cost.[5]

Raymond Williams points to the mixed blessing of industrial progress when he comments on Dickens's depiction of this problem in Hard Times as too much of a good thing: "Rationality . . . has been made a function of a mode of production, overriding other values. People have been reduced in

Coketown to 'Hands.'"[6] Angus Wilson remarks that in Hard Times "Dickens gives up one of his last active hopes--the ideal of self-help, of ambition, of social striving";[7] and yet, in Our Mutual Friend, his last complete novel, he returns to the "ideal of self-help" embodied in Lizzie Hexam and Betty Higden. In this novel he contrasts the avaricious pursuit of easy money which turns to ashes, with hard, honest labour. This shift of attitude accounts for the idealization of the mill owners who employ Lizzie. Therefore, when we read about "the clean village by the paper-mill" (OMF, p. 580) and come across Lizzie's praise of her employers--"They most willingly and cheerfully do their duty to all of us who are employed here, and we try to do ours to them. Indeed they do much more than their duty to us, for they are wonderfully mindful of us in many ways" (OMF, p. 579)--it is important to note that this is what Dickens wished to see rather than what he knew to be true.

Like Kate and Emily, Lizzie struggles for a respectable way of life but is threatened by sexual exploitation; and she, too, is saved by a surprising turn of events, and a highly dramatic one at that. Her beauty attracts Eugene Wrayburn, a gentleman of indolent habits and no steady purpose in life. He pursues her, undeterred by the menacing looks of a rival, but has no intention of marrying her. In Slater's words, "The threat Wrayburn represents is to make her into a 'doll', his plaything-mistress, and it is a powerful threat because Lizzie's own heart is already given to him."[8] Although Lizzie flees from his attentions and hides herself in a remote village, she cherishes the memory of his kindness and attachment to her as an incentive to improve herself: "he has made a change within me, like--like the change in the grain of these hands, which were coarse, and cracked, and hard, and brown

. . . and are softened and made supple by this new work" (p. 590).[9] Far from trying to conquer her own growing love for Wrayburn, a man much too superior to her, socially, to make her his wife, she encourages this weakness of her heart. To Bella Wilfer, she confesses: "Does a woman's heart that--that has that weakness in it which you have spoken of . . . seek to gain anything?" (p. 590). Such intense emotion could not have lain suppressed indefinitely, even if Eugene's blood were not made to flow because of it.

Eugene Wrayburn does not have the moral strength to fight his infatuation with Lizzie and insists on following her. He is attacked by his rival, Bradley Headstone, and thrown into the river; he would have died from his injuries and suffocation but Lizzie discovers his floating body and pulls him ashore. In her father's lifetime, Lizzie helped him to row his boat and tow in corpses of drowned men and women, and now she uses her physical strength and skill to rescue the man she loves. Eugene gains a new life and a change of heart. We see here not the conventional Dickensian ending where a misunderstood character is finally rewarded for passive devotion under hopeless conditions, but the actual shaping of one's destiny through active endeavour. Slater cites Agnes of David Copperfield as one such character who triumphs after a period of loyal resignation: "But Lizzie has to take a more active role than that at the end when her quick-wittedness, physical strength and skill in rowing are needed to rescue Wrayburn from drowning."[10] Lizzie remains loyal to her past, refusing to be dissuaded by her brother who turns his back on his father's manual trade and becomes genteel. Her experience of manual labour saves Eugene for her. In this episode, Dickens truly exhalts the dignity and the saving power of labour. We may compare Lizzie's fate

with Alice Brown of Dombey and Son. Both attract gentlemen who do not intend to marry them; while Alice passively accepts her fate to be toyed with by Carker and thrown away, Lizzie boldly resists Eugene's attentions. She gains strength from her faith in manual labour and is eventually elevated by it.

For the very young and inexperienced, like Little Nell, or the very old with fading strength, like Betty Higden, the struggle to earn a living is physically exacting and at the same time the earnings are pathetically inadequate for sustenance. Both die--the one worn out through a long life of hard labour, and the other prematurely crushed by bodily and mental sufferings too heavy for her age. Both these characters have symbolic statures in their respective novels that is far greater than the extent of their actual accomplishment. Victims of weakness, defeat and death, they yet exalt the ideal of self-help. They stand for the principle of honest labour and glorify the concept of work by becoming willing martyrs in a world rapaciously greedy for unearned wealth. And in so doing, they call down a quiet judgement on that world which refuses to the weak the option of a dignified, self-reliant existence. What they try to do is important; that they fail is of still greater significance.

In his characterization of Nell, Dickens endows her with a fragility that contrasts sharply with the harsh life in store for her. The old man who leads the lost child to her home is deeply moved by this incongruity: "So very young, so spiritual, so slight and fairy-like a creature passing the long dull nights in such an uncongenial place--I could not dismiss it from my thoughts" (OCS, p. 55). She is an unlikely figure to inspire the notion of hard work; indeed, Steven Marcus remarks that The Old Curiosity Shop celebrates the idea of inaction: "The

strongest impulse with which the novel is charged is the desire to disengage itself from energy, the desire for inertia. The fatigue and steady decline of vitality which Nell suffers is merely one manifestation of this need."[11] But is not her fatigue rather the logical and inevitable result of a long and fruitless search for work? "Nell, a fourteen-year-old child, assumes the burden of providing and caring for her irresponsible grandfather, the effort of which destroys her."[12] She assumes the task of providing cheerfully enough; it is the disheartening process, a travesty of self-reliance, that actually undermines her spirit. From the time of their stealthy departure from London in the middle of the night to the moment of Nell's death, the child and her grandfather survive on charity. She assures the old man that they "may beg, or work in open roads or fields, to earn a scanty living" (OCS, p. 122), but her sanguine hope of work is scarcely realized; they thrive or suffer, depending on whether or not they meet a chance benefactor. And so begins their journey of despair. In the town where they meet the exhibitors of the Punch show, Nell finds "She had a little money, but it was very little, and when that was gone, they must begin to beg" (p. 186). At the fair, she declares: "Making some nosegays . . . I am going to try and sell some" (p. 211), but this is a pitiful pretence of earning and when she approaches, "with timid and modest looks, to offer them at some gay carriage," she finds that "there were many bolder beggars there" (p. 213). Angus Wilson mentions this sort of attempt to cloak abject want under a pretence of respectable labour as a final grasp at pride before a poor woman yields to selling herself; he refers to Sketches by Boz:

> Here we read of a poor working girl trying to earn her living by making 'some elegant trifle for sale': 'If those thoughtless females who interfere with the miserable market of poor creatures such as these knew but one half of the misery they suffer . . . in their honourable attempts to earn a scanty subsistence, they would, perhaps, resign even opportunities for the gratification of vanity . . . rather than drive them to a last resource, which it would shock the delicate feelings of these charitable ladies to hear named.'[13]

The courtesan in the carriage foresees such a fate for Nell; she "called the child towards her, and taking her flowers put money into her trembling hand, and bade her go home and keep at home for God's sake" (p. 214). Of course, Nell is too young to understand the implication of these words and Dickens's design to keep his heroine pure and innocent lets her die before such a warning can take effect. But it is true enough that her efforts to "earn" a respectable living are quite futile; only the charity of generous souls keeps her alive. To the schoolmaster who shelters them for a while, "the child held out . . . the money which the lady had given her at the races for her flowers . . . But he bade her put it up, and stooping to kiss her cheek, turned back into his house" (p. 262). The work she does for Mrs Jarley, considering the quality of board and lodging she gains in return, is light enough to be an excuse for the good lady's charity.[14] Finally, the position she accepts at their last destination, replacing "an old person, nearly a hundred years of age, who kept the keys of the church, opened and closed it for services, and showed it to strangers" (p. 482) is clearly an apology for work, made in consideration of a very feeble person. Little wonder, then, that the young girl who once has such ecstatic visions of a carefree life ("Let us walk through country places, and sleep in fields and under trees . . . rest at nights, and have the sun and wind upon our faces in the day, and thank God together," p. 124) should gradually droop into a state of

lassitude and yearn for the peace of death. Her humanity seeks to express itself through labour, but her role in the novel transforms her into an angel; society furnishes the context and pretext for this sacrifice of her human self.

Betty Higden has had an active and independent life. At an age "nigher fourscore year than threescore and ten" (OMF, p. 248), she continues to keep a Minding School with the help of Sloppy, an orphan boy devoted to her. However, when the Boffins decide to employ Sloppy, and when Betty Higden secretly parts from him so that he does not refuse this advantageous situation for her sake, she becomes as weak and helpless as a child--not less so than Little Nell herself. The Boffins wish to extend their kindness to her, but she remains resolved not to accept charity: "It ain't that I'm not grateful, but I love to earn it better" (p. 252). But, with her failing strength, how can she support herself? She chooses that last honourable, but ineffective, recourse for those who cannot really work--namely, selling trifles that no one wants:

> I'm a good fair knitter, and can make many little things to sell. The loan from your lady and gentleman of twenty shillings to fit out a basket with, would be a fortune for me. Trudging round the country and tiring myself out, I shall keep the deadness off, and get my own bread by my own labour. (OMF, pp. 440-41)

This cheerful prospect suggested before John Rokesmith soon dissolves into despair. As Betty Higden finds out, the effort hardly yields enough to repay her debt and keep her alive. The ordeal saps all her remaining strength, and she just manages to purchase her freedom from the workhouse by giving up her meagre savings of "a shilling, and two sixpenny pieces, and a few pence" (p. 572) to Rogue Riderhood before she wanders to a quiet village and breathes her last. Death is unavoidable; many rich

people have a much shorter life than Betty Higden, but the spirit she exhibits in life and carries to her grave is significant. She exemplifies integrity and self-reliance among a class of people who are considered from a bourgeois viewpoint to be too poor to have moral values. Through her, Dickens asserts the responsibility of government and society, not to establish charity-houses which demean human beings, but to expand opportunities of work for the honest poor. As Arnold Kettle argues:

> This is the significance of the Betty Higden episode which is all too easily seen as merely a bit of doubtless well-intentioned propaganda against the workhouses and their 'honourable boards', a not very relevant return to the preoccupations of Oliver Twist. In naturalistic terms old Betty is no doubt overdone . . . yet her uncompromising and obsessional determination to be beholden to no one, even the undemanding Mrs Boffin, is an important, and I think necessary, strand in the pattern of Dickens's presentation of the problems of poverty and working-class morality. To accept patronage is to lose independence, to drift into the arms of the 'honourable boards' is to accept human degradation.[15]

Significantly, old as she is, Betty Higden seems not to die of old age; rather, her delirious last moments suggest death brought about by a broken spirit. She becomes increasingly aware that her powers are failing, that pride in her ability to work belongs to the past. It is this realization of her unfitness for fruitful labour that ultimately crushes her spirit and stills her brave heart.

What is Dickens's attitude towards prostitutes, victims of a social system which denies poor women the chance to survive by honest labour? He considers them truly tragic figures, and "Prostitutes in Dickens's work are never in any way associated with gaiety, however reprehensible."[16] They invariably repent the circumstances of their fall; they are distracted by the consciousness of their hopeless condition; and, with their "low, dreary, wretched moaning" (DC, p. 399) and their

"strange, wild, cry" (LD, p. 218), they are terrible warnings to unfallen women who seem unmindful of their good fortune. Wilson's opinion is that they are depicted as "delicate-speaking allegories of Woman made Victim"[17] rather than as real women: "His prostitutes are not quite holy women . . . but their sacrifice by society does mark them out for some special scapegoat isolation; they are all oleograph Magdalens alien from the bustling vitality of the books."[18] In real life, Dickens made efforts to rehabilitate these unfortunate women: "He had, in May 1848, eagerly responded to Miss Coutts's plan of establishing an asylum for prostitutes discharged from prison who wanted to make a new start in life, and were prepared to go overseas to find it."[19] The result of this plan was Urania Cottage and "In the late forties Dickens himself drew up the rules to govern Urania Cottage . . . and in the fifties he was much concerned in the management of it."[20] According to Michael Slater, Dickens visualized marriage and happy domestication for the woman who was seen by society in general "as having for ever forfeited the possibility of becoming a respectable wife and mother."[21] However, even though Dickens is generous enough to champion the cause of women who suffer through the faults of others, he is not entirely free from a personal revulsion for their fallen state. And so, while he tries to inspire hoards of prostitutes to strive for a decent life by transporting Martha Endell of David Copperfield to Australia to become a farmer's wife, he seems to set up a different, more rigorous, standard for particular women with a finer moral sensibility. Emily, for example, is not allowed to forget the stain upon her:

> She ends up devoting herself to Mr Peggotty and a life of unobtrusive good works in the Australian outback--thereby undermining . . . the whole idea behind Urania Cottage since we are clearly meant to be more moved by her saintly ending than by Martha's pastoral domesticity.[22]

There is clearly a disparity between Dickens's social consciousness and his aesthetic taste.

As mentioned earlier, physical suffering being a focal consideration in the lives of women in this category, the practice of fantasy is less consistently apparent among them. Nell and Betty Higden undergo the starkest form of poverty; they are too frequently driven by the necessity of food to think about their personal image. Besides, one is too young and the other too old to suffer from the sexual conflicts that lie at the source of the fictions discussed in the earlier chapters. We perceive a sexual motive in Quilp's pursuit of Nell, but the girl herself shows no sexual consciousness, except for her fear of the deformed man. Kate Nickleby's role as a working woman is too short-lived to produce any eccentricities resulting from maladjustment to her situation. In Miss Knag, Emily and Lizzie, however, we do see a fond reaching out towards an existence far removed from their real lives and only to be approached across the bridge of dream or fantasy. Miss Knag's behaviour towards her employer is utterly servile; she compensates for the indignity by pretending to gentility, to youth, and to beauty. "Miss Knag wore clothes of a very youthful pattern, and perhaps her feelings took the same shape" (NN, p. 288); and it is her pride and delusion to believe that for "fifteen years [she has] been the credit and ornament" (p. 298) of Madame Mantalini's establishment. Her bragging is in proportion to Mrs Nickleby's torrent of words: her mother, she says, "had that one

failing of lending money, and carried it to such an extent that she lent --hem--oh! thousands of pounds, all of our little fortunes" (p. 291). With his customary jocularity, Dickens dwells on her single state and the manner in which she defends herself from any allusion to it. When Mrs Nickleby cries that Miss Knag does not know what it is to lose a husband, the latter is quick to avoid the possible assumption that she might not have found one:

> As Miss Knag had never yet known what it was to gain one, it followed very nearly as a matter of course that she didn't know what it was to lose one, so she said in some haste, 'No, indeed I don't,' and said it with an air intended to signify that she should like to catch herself marrying anybody--no no, she knew better than that. (NN, p. 289)

Obviously, Dickens means readers to understand that this is pretence, but it is also fair to assume that, with the example of Mme Mantalini's predicament constantly before her eyes, Miss Knag's regret at being a spinster is tempered somewhat by the relief of being independent. However that may be, this much is evident from Miss Knag's fiction about herself: it is much better to be young, beautiful and in possession of a fortune than to be elderly, plain and obliged to work for a living.

Emily and Lizzie are both working-class women who have no deliberately false pretension to gentility, but their association with men of aristocratic birth stirs in each of them the unlikely dream of becoming a lady. It is true that Dickens indicates more than once that Emily desires to be a lady because "she would like to do so-and-so for her uncle . . . and buy him such-and-such fine things" (p. 363) but it is also true that she has some vanity regarding her own beauty ("Then out of a very little, she could dress herself, you see, better than most others could out of a deal, and that made things unpleasant," p. 363) and this

vanity is fanned by Steerforth's attentions. For Emily, fulfillment as a woman comes neither through working, nor through being the wife of a humble boatmaker, but only through being a gentleman's lady, the only state which will properly recognize her feminine charm. Lizzie Hexam is an honest girl who stands staunchly by her father, much as she loathes his occupation, thereby accepting her low-class origin and forcing her friends, like Miss Potterson and Eugene Wrayburn, to accept it, too. Even she sees visions of a lady in "The hollow down by the flare" (OMF, p. 404), a lady who is equal to Eugene in social rank, so that she may inspire him to a purposeful life: "She is glad, glad, to be rich, that he may have the money. She is glad, glad, to be beautiful, that he may be proud of her" (p. 404). She takes great pains to preserve her human dignity through self-reliance and hard work, but her sexual feelings seek an outlet in a dream of fortune, rank and beauty. Thus we see that the life of women who try to make a living by manual employment is harsh and joyless. The more successful among them try to relieve their empty existence by indulging in harmless fictions, but the majority are too broken in spirit even to dream.

CHAPTER IV

FREE-LANCE SERVICE

We find in Dickens's fiction a group of women with special skills who are not employed by others but earn a modest income independently. Their efforts are service-oriented and, consequently, in greater demand than the sort of work examined in the last chapter--namely, unskilled manual labour. These women enjoy a certain liberty that is painfully missing in the case of women engaged in either genteel or manual employment. They are free from the physical and psychological confinement suffered by governesses and lady companions, and they are not as desperately driven for basic sustenance as poor women with an indifferent aptitude for work. Although they are not as prosperous or powerful as independent business-women, they still enjoy a professional autonomy that leaves them choices in pursuing their own inclinations in their private lives. While it is true that the stamp of their occupation is easily discernible in their speech and behaviour, the effect of their situation is not enough to penetrate surface mannerisms to mould the guiding principles of their lives. In fact, the element of choice is strongly emphasized in the characterization of these women. What they choose to do, and how they choose to do it, are determined by their personality and not by the pressures inherent in their role as working women. As examples, I wish to examine Mrs Nubbles, a launderess, from The Old Curiosity Shop; Sairey Gamp and Betsy Prig, nurses, from Martin Chuzzlewit; Miss Mowcher, a hairdresser, from David Copperfield; and Amy

Dorrit, a sempstress, from Little Dorrit. A most casual glance at these characters reveals a clear moral opposition between Mrs Nubbles and Amy Dorrit on the one hand, who are motivated by honest, unselfish impulses, and on the other hand Sairey Gamp, Betsy Prig, and Miss Mowcher as she was originally intended, who are thoroughly selfish and given to false rationalizations. Fiction-making, as an element in the conflicts experienced by working women, is an important focus of this study, and the most elaborate fictions are created by the women mentioned above; even these fictions show marked differences of motivation that distinguish the morally good characters from the immoral or the amoral.

In the Preface to the 1849 'Cheap Edition' of Martin Chuzzlewit, Dickens states that "Mrs Sarah Gamp is a representation of the hired attendant on the poor in sickness" and "Mrs Betsy Prig is a fair specimen of a Hospital Nurse." While Betsy's role as a hospital nurse may be admitted, it must be observed of Sairey that if Dickens intended her as a 'type' he failed, but failed admirably, because she is a character of unforgettable parts. Her appearance, speech and actions combine into a unique person so that a class of Mrs Gamps is inconceivable. The noise and bustle with which she usurps the personal territory of people around her, with her particular license as nurse and midwife, gains her an almost monumental presence in the novel, as is suggested by Michael Slater's description of her: "Her ample form presides, with tipsy gusto, over the great twin mysteries of our existence, birth and death, and she overflows with arcane female wisdom on these matters, a wisdom dauntingly inaccessible to men."[1] Her professional enthusiasm derives from the expectation of good food and drink in the homes of the gentry where she performs her services; her instructions about sustenance are detailed and

precise:

> I think . . . that I could pick a little bit of pickled salmon, with a nice little sprig of fennel, and a sprinkling of white pepper. I takes new bread . . . with jest a little pat of fresh butter, and a mossel of cheese. In case there should be such a thing as a cowcumber in the 'ouse, will you be so kind as to bring it, for I'm rather partial to 'em, and they does a world of good in a sick room. If they draws the Brighton Old Tipper here, I takes that ale at night, my love; it bein' considered wakeful by the doctors. (MC, p. 480)

It would be a folly to question what good cucumbers do to a dying patient, or how Mrs Gamp manages to sleep soundly through the night after copious draughts of the "wakeful" ale. She sets the rules about night-watching, which are to "the pint and purpose" (MC, p. 382), and not being "a Rooshan or a Prooshan" (p. 382), cannot tolerate being watched herself: "But in whatever way you earns your bread, you may have rules and regulations of your own which cannot be broke through" (p. 382). As long as her own conditions are met, it matters little to Mrs Gamp whether it is birth or death that requires her presence: "Like most persons who have attained to great eminence in their profession, she took to hers very kindly; insomuch that, setting aside her natural predilections as a woman, she went to a lying-in or a laying-out with equal zest and relish" (p. 378). When John Westlock engages her to look after his friend, "she pinned his wandering arms against his sides, to see how he would look if laid out as a dead man . . . . her fingers itched to compose his limbs in that last marble attitude" (p. 479). It is this amazing impartiality towards birth and death that makes Mrs Gamp a monstrous distortion in the eyes of her creator of the ideal image of woman, as nurse and preserver of life. It is not her work that unsexes Mrs Gamp; it is that she is so incapable of feeling herself, that the typically female role of tending the sick fails

to arouse her maternal instincts.

Mrs Gamp is immensely practical; she suits the means to the end, and while the end is achieved, she gives no thought to the ethics of her behaviour. She "administered the patient's medicine, by the simple process of clutching his windpipe, to make him gasp, and immediately pouring it down his throat" (p. 481). If her patients survive her rough treatment, that alone is the highest testimony of her success as a nurse; if they die, there is no witness to the harsh circumstances that may have hastened their end. For Mrs Gamp, fiction is the most effective means to various ends. Her entire personality is steeped in pretence. She has "a face for all occasions" (p. 376) and affects deep grief for the departed Anthony Chuzzlewit, although "She didn't even know his name" (p. 378). She affects patience and forbearance by talking mournfully about her dead husband, for whom she cared so little as to sell his body to the hospital morgue ("she had indeed borne up surprisingly; and had exerted such uncommon fortitude as to dispose of Mr Gamp's remains for the benefit of science," p. 378), and about her dead children, who probably never existed: "My own has fallen out of three-pair backs, and had damp doorsteps settled on their lungs, and one was turned up smilin' in a bedstead, unbeknown . . . . Mine, . . . mine is all gone" (MC, p. 700). One does not sense in this account the regret of a real mother, but rather the impersonal, self-satisfied admiration of a story-teller for the dramatic picture she has created. She affects pity for her suffering fellows to rationalize her drinking: "If it wasn't for the nerve a little sip of liquor gives me (I never was able to do more than taste it), I never could go through with what I sometimes has to do" (p. 379). She affects poverty to persuade rich families to give her new clothes, which

she sells to second-hand clothes shops: "In these dilapidated articles of dress she had, on principle, arrayed herself, time out of mind . . . for this at once expressed a decent amount of veneration for the deceased, and invited the next of kin to present her with a fresher suit of weeds" (p. 378). She flatters Mrs Mould to gain as an ally her husband, the undertaker, who supports her wholeheartedly in hypocritical practices. She accepts patients in two different places, with Mr Mould's approval, and returns his favour with the assurance that if the gentleman dies, she "might take the liberty of saying as I know'd some one in the undertaking line" (p. 475). Mrs Gamp recognizes fiction as an art of convenience, and she preserves the fictions of others, as well as her own, to serve their mutual self-interest. She suspects Jonas Chuzzlewit of a mysterious crime, but is quite willing to overlook the wrong because she herself has no moral scruple: "But we never knows wot's hidden in each other's hearts; and if we had winders there, we'd need keep the shetters up, some on us, I do assure you!" (pp. 534-35). Only because John Westlock comes upon her directly after her quarrel with Betsy Prig and hears some unguarded words spoken, is he able to make her participate in his plan to unmask the murderer ("We know quite enough to carry her our own way now," p. 839). Her fiction is in the service of evil and the exploitation of the unwary.

The personage of Mrs Harris is the most lively pretence of Mrs Gamp and, compared to all her other deceptions, it is the least harmful. In Gissing's words, "so superabundant is her facility in the way of discourse that she has been led to invent an imaginary friend, a supposed constant interlocutrix, whose remarks, faithfully reported, lend graceful variety to her self-praise and her compliments."[2] The motivation for the

creation of Mrs Harris is, then, self-praise; she also affords an admirable opportunity to make known Mrs Gamp's expectations to the people who hire her:

> '"Mrs Harris," I says, at the very last case as ever I acted in, which it was but a young person, "Mrs Harris," I says, "leave the bottle on the chimley-piece, and don't ask me to take none, but let me put my lips to it when I am so dispoged, and then I will do what I'm engaged to do, according to the best of my ability." "Mrs Gamp," she says, in answer, "if there was ever a sober creetur to be got at eighteen pence a day for working people, and three and six for gentlefolks--night watching,"' said Mrs Gamp, with emphasis, '"being a extra charge--you are that inwallable person."' (MC, p. 379)

Despite Mrs Gamp's vice and vulgarity, the reader cannot withhold admiration for the imaginative power that allows her to improvise situations to her best advantage. It is as if she is always on-stage, telling stories extempore. Sairey Gamp is all surface--she has no moral integrity, no feelings, no attachments. Hillis Miller says: "The fact of Sairey's intensely self-centered consciousness makes everything in her neighbourhood orient itself around her like iron filings around a magnet."[3] She appropriates people, as well as things, to transform them into instruments of her selfishness, and so she does not form any human relationship. The character conjured up by the remarks of the imaginary Mrs Harris has more substance than the real Mrs Gamp, notwithstanding her enormous physical bulk. And so, when Betsy Prig demolishes this fascinating fiction, Mrs Gamp's own self-image crumbles. As Grahame Smith remarks, "with the lack of self-knowledge of the utterly self-absorbed, she remains blissfully unconscious of her own evil";[4] she believes in her fictitious self and when its existence is denied, she is left gaping at the emptiness revealed under her verbosity.

Although Betsy Prig is the means by which the novelist destroys

Sairey's false stance, she is no better a person than her rival. Betsy has all of Sairey's faults without the exuberance that makes the latter amusing. It is Betsy who recommends the choicest fare at the house where they take turns at nursing Mr Lewsome ("The pickled salmon . . . is quite delicious. I can partick'ler recommend it" [p. 478]) and advises Mrs Gamp on how to make herself comfortable for the night: "The easy-chair an't soft enough. You'll want his piller" (p. 479). In George Gissing's opinion, Betsy is beyond doubt the worse of the two:

> Be it remarked that there is an appreciable difference between Mrs Gamp's nature and that of Mrs Prig; we are clearly shown that Betsy is the harder, coarser, more mercenary of the twain. If well plied with spirits and pickled cucumber, Sarah Gamp might be capable of an elementary generosity . . . . Betsy Prig is of a lower order, even socially; one may be sure that she had much less to do with the better class of clients. There is in her a spitefulness, a greedy malignancy, not found in the nurse of Kingsgate Street.[5]

Sairey does seem to show a genuine concern for expectant mothers. Her motto is to preserve the mother ("Bless the babe, and save the mother, is my mortar," p. 706), and real solicitude for Mercy's conditon takes her to the dock when Jonas tries to escape with his young wife (p. 701). Betsy attacks Sairey's fantasy not from any love of truth, but because she herself is incapable of fiction. In Smith's words, Sairey Gamp is both "a harbinger of death" and "an affirmer of life"; "as an artistic creation her final effect is one of life-enhancing vitality."[6] With almost identical attributes otherwise, Betsy lacks this vitality and becomes an effective foil to show the transforming power of imagination.

Miss Mowcher of David Copperfield is another character who uses fiction for an evil purpose. She is a hairdresser who charges "five bobs" or "two half-crowns" for a sitting. The rich and the vain need her

services and she knows how to indulge their fancy and enrich herself. She carries around scraps that she calls "the Russian Prince's nails" (DC, p. 389) to impress her clients: "The Prince's nails do more for me in private families of the genteel sort, than all my talents put together" (p. 390). But she is more than a hairdresser. Under cover of her harmless trade, she functions as a procuress. Her profession as hairdresser gives her easy access to people's homes and lulls suspicion. She helps Steerforth to lure Emily away from her home and protective relatives. However, when Miss Mowcher next appears in the novel, she is radically changed in character, because Mrs Seymour Hill, a one-time neighbour of Dickens and a manicurist by profession, thought she saw herself depicted in the person of Miss Mowcher and sent him a grieved letter. As David Copperfield was appearing serially, he took the opportunity to change Miss Mowcher's role in a subsequent chapter. In his study of Dickens's female characters, Michael Slater refers to this episode:

> Still more horrific for Dickens than the rejector of sisterhood however, is the procuress figure, the woman who seems deliberately to ruin others, or to connive at their ruin. This is the role that Miss Mowcher was evidently intended to play in Copperfield before Dickens had to change her character totally after hearing from Mrs Hill and her solicitor.[7]

The change is very unconvincing from a psychological point of view and artistically incoherent.

Dickens's original conception of Miss Mowcher's role fits well with the general circumstances of her life. Her distorted body accounts for her distorted sexuality. With "a pair of roguish grey eyes" she "ogled Steerforth" (p. 386) and she teases David about his beardless,

effeminate face: "Face like a peach! . . . Quite tempting! I'm very fond of peaches" (p. 389). Debarred from a relationship herself because of her defect, she rejoices in the sexual intrigues of others. It is likely also that she enjoys the ruin of other women out of spite for her own deformed condition. When Dickens alters this character "in quite another way, making it point a lesson of charity,"[8] the result is bathetic. Miss Mowcher takes her leave of David with a solemn advice--"Try not to associate bodily defects with mental, my good friend, except for a solid reason" (p. 526)--but how can David believe her when he has earlier observed that he "never beheld anything approaching Miss Mowcher's wink except Miss Mowcher's self-possession" (p. 388)? However, the moral change in Miss Mowcher does not affect Dickens's depiction of her as a working woman. We actually see her in the act of performing her professional service. She claims that her art can keep Steerforth's "curls on for the next ten years!" (DC, p. 39) and then busies herself with the task:

> With this, she tilted some of the contents of the little bottle on to one of the little bits of flannel, and, again imparting some of the virtues of that preparation to one of the little brushes, began rubbing and scraping away with both on the crown of Steerforth's head in the busiest manner I ever witnessed, talking all the time. (DC, p. 391)

She also suggests some improvements on David's face, like carrying his eyebrows "half a quarter of an inch towards the temple . . . . We can do it in a fortnight" or getting "the scaffolding up . . . for a pair of whiskers" (DC, p. 394). Miss Mowcher's pride and joy in her work are forcefully conveyed to the reader by these images.

Miss Mowcher claims that her "volatile" (p. 395) self is a fictitious one, assumed to amuse her clients: "If there are people so

unreflecting or so cruel, as to make a jest of me, what is left for me to do but to make a jest of myself, them, and everything?" (p. 523). She rationalizes this deception by pointing to her poverty: "What I am, my father was; and my sister is; and my brother is. I have worked for sister and brother these many years--hard, Mr Copperfield--all day. I must live" (p. 523). Mrs Gamp makes the same excuse for her deceptive behaviour: "I will not deny . . . that I am but a poor woman, and that money is a object" (MC, p. 474), but there are two characters in Dickens's fiction who seem poorer but do not make poverty their excuse for moral laxity--namely, Mrs Nubbles in The Old Curiosity Shop and Amy Dorrit. Where Sairey Gamp sells her new clothes and wears old ones to affect poverty, Mrs Nubbles takes such good care of her children's clothes that they seem new ("little Jacob and the baby in such a state of perfection that their clothes looked as good as new, though Heaven knows they were old enough" [OCS, p. 374]). With her "thin worn shoes" and "insufficient dress" (LD, p. 212), Amy Dorrit walks the streets of London in cold, damp weather with no thought for her own discomfort.

Mrs Nubbles is a widow with three children who relies on her skill as a launderess and long hours of hard labour to provide for them and does not attempt to earn extra money by deluding others: "Late as the Dutch clock showed it to be, the poor woman was still hard at work at the ironing-table" (OCS, p. 131). We know she is experienced in her profession when she fetches another iron from the fireplace and returns to the table "holding the iron at an alarmingly short distance from her cheek, to test its temperature" (p. 133). The characterization of Mrs Nubbles is a tribute to the working woman; at the same time as she is the breadwinner of the family, she is a model mother and housewife. When the

Garlands visit her home to check out Kit's family before they employ him, Mrs Garland is impressed with Mrs Nubbles and assures her that "certainly the appearance of the children and the cleanliness of the house deserved great praise and did her the utmost credit" (p. 221). She has a close and confidential relationship with Kit and actively encourages good behaviour in him. She teases him for watching every night over Nell until she is safely in her bed, but she also compliments him on his kindness, saying "it's very good and thoughtful, and like you, to do this, and never let anybody know it" (p. 134). She is not naive; she is aware of the existence of evil and the necessity to guard against it. She fears for her son when Nell communicates her grandfather's accusation against Kit:

> The poor woman, who had no cause to doubt her son, but every reason for relying on his honesty and truth, was staggered notwithstanding by his not having advanced one word in his defence. Visions of gallantry, knavery, robbery; and of the nightly absences from home for which he had accounted so strangely, having been occasioned by some unlawful pursuit; flocked into her brain and rendered her afraid to question him. (OCS, pp. 135-36)

Kit is moulded by his mother's principles. When he is imprisoned on a false charge, Mrs Nubbles's ideals suffer a blow. When he is acquitted, the mother who trusts in her son and trusts in truth triumphs over the greatest extremity.

Even this simple, upright woman has a fiction of her own but it originates in humility and not in any selfish desire. Mrs Nubbles does not believe in her own innate goodness and clings to religion as a shield against the "Evil Power" (p. 454). This shield is really only a pretence, because she hardly hears, let alone follows, the parson's words although she dutifully attends the services at Little Bethel. When Kit goes there

in search of his mother, he finds her asleep:

> Kit's mother, who finding it matter of extreme difficulty to keep her eyes open, . . . and feeling their inclination to close strongly backed and seconded by the arguments of the preacher, had yielded to the drowsiness that overpowered her, and fallen asleep; though not so soundly but that she could from time to time utter a slight and almost inaudible groan, as if in recognition of the orator's doctrines. (p. 390)

She wakes up exclaiming: "Oh, Christopher, how have I been edified this night!" (p. 392). Kit reproaches her for this fiction: "That's the way you do. If you're happy or merry ever, you come here to say, along with that chap, that you're sorry for it. More shame for you, mother, I was going to say" (pp. 392-93). This show of deference to religion is a harmless deception that the poor woman indulges in. Comparing Mrs Nubbles with Mrs Weller of Pickwick Papers and Mrs Varden of Barnaby Rudge, Michael Slater says that she "is one of the least culpable of these religion-infected women."[9] Indeed, she is the most innocent and inobtrusive of people.

Sairey Gamp and Miss Mowcher use fiction for selfish reasons; Mrs Nubbles uses it to support her timid nature; Amy Dorrit uses fiction to do positive good. In all her acts, she is impelled by thoroughly unselfish designs. Born in the Marshalsea prison; child of a hopelessly deluded father; with a vain, impetuous girl for a sister, and an irresponsible idler for a brother, Amy becomes the protector and provider for the entire family: "She took the place of eldest of the three, in all things but precedence; was the head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames" (LD, pp. 111-12). When she is barely thirteen years of age, she arranges for her sister, Fanny, to train as a dancer while she herself takes lessons from a milliner,

with the object of earning a living as a sempstress. While her family undergoes steady moral degeneration through mistaken notions of gentility, Amy accepts their fallen fortune and strives her utmost to rise above the corruption of environment. Like Lizzie Hexam, Amy Dorrit is very conscious of the degradations accompanying her existence but, like her, she remains loyal to her origin: "With a still surviving attachment to the one miserable yard and block of houses as her birthplace and home, she passed to and fro in it shrinkingly now, with a womanly consciousness that she was pointed out to every one" (LD, p. 118). In an article, Barbara Hardy mentions both girls together as examples of Dickens's characters who remain unsullied by corrupting circumstances in their lives:

> Dickens, like most of us, told himself a fiction about the actual workings of society, and out of it created that scale where human nature slid inevitably into greed, brutality, degradation. He also created another fiction about the powerful human nature that could resist the environment. Hence Oliver Twist, Little Nell, Florence and Paul, Agnes, Little Dorrit, Esther, and Lizzie Hexam.[10]

For Amy Dorrit, fiction is a powerful device that bridges the gap between sordid reality and the abstract values she holds, as well as her despairing dreams of personal happiness.

The Dorrit family lives by the notion of "honour," and while Amy alone comprehends the spirit of honour, her father, brother and sister pay homage to the letter. To the others, gentility consists in maintaining a proper distance from the working class and disdaining to work for a living. Even begging, if it is cloaked in graceful phrase and gesture, is preferable to work. Only Amy realizes that work, the earning of one's own bread, lends true honour to the individual. However, Amy is meek and cannot force her values upon those whose overbearing manner

makes a virtue of their petty pretensions. So she has to fall back on fiction. The father has to be spared the knowledge that his daughters work for a living: "So, over and above other daily cares, the Child of the Marshalsea had always upon her the care of preserving the genteel fiction that they were all idle beggars together" (LD, p. 114). The father is not the only person whose fiction Amy is obliged to sustain. Her sister and brother, too, patronize her for her humble, common ways: "It was the family custom to lay it down as family law, that she was a plain, domestic little creature, without the great and sage experience of the rest. The family fiction was the family assertion of itself against her services" (pp. 279-80). Amy participates in the fiction because it is the only way she can help her family. She admits shyly to Arthur Clennam, "I could never have been of any use, if I had not pretended a little" (p. 211). With the same generosity of heart that determines her relationship with her own family, Amy promises to protect the fiction of Arthur's mother. When Mrs Clennam approaches Amy in the Marshalsea, she is a broken person, incapable of doing any more harm to anyone. So when she confesses her past wrongdoing and stoops so far as to beg the young girl's forgiveness, Amy promises that she "will not disclose this to Arthur until [Mrs Clennam] is dead" (p. 858). Thus Little Dorrit admits fiction to her life from the motive of generosity.

Not only the fiction of others pervades Amy's existence; she has secret fantasies of her own to light up her dark days and to give her the strength to go on with her dismal life. When she visits Arthur Clennam, pretending to her father that she is going to a party, and is later forced to spend the night in the streets, Amy indulges her dawning love for Arthur with dreams of a real party:

> 'If it really was a party!' she thought once, as she sat there. 'If it was light and warm and beautiful, and it was our house . . . . And if Mr Clennam was one of our visitors, and we were dancing to delightful music, and were all as gay and light-hearted as ever we could be!' (pp. 216-17)

The social difference between an imprisoned debtor's daughter and the son of her rich patroness is barrier enough, but in addition Arthur looks upon Amy as a child, even addresses her as "my child" (p. 209). She has the sentiments of a grown woman, but cannot express them because the man she loves does not perceive her as such. The pain of her suppressed sexuality finds an outlet in the touching story of the princess and the poor little woman, that she makes up to amuse Maggy. Convinced that Arthur still loves Flora Finching, who is the princess of her story, Amy consoles herself with the memory of Arthur's kindness and the secret of her unrequited, unrecognized love; and like the tiny woman's shadow "she [is] proud of it with all her heart, as a great, great treasure" (p. 341). Even in her half-hidden dreams, Amy's imagination takes no selfish or destructive turn.

All the characters discussed in this chapter choose deliberately to live their lives in certain ways. They agree that fiction is a way of living in harmony with one's world; however, they differ as to what aspect of that world they choose to incorporate into their lives. Mrs Gamp and Miss Mowcher are in rapport with the evil ways of society, participate in its hypocrisies and reap the fruits of their cunning deception. Mrs Nubbles and Amy Dorrit resist the corrupt forces of their environment by virtue of their unselfish natures; they are content with modest achievements and transgress the happiness of no one to please their own fancy. All four are successful as working women, because they all arrive at a level of economic independence where they are not obliged to fashion their

lives according to the dictates of anyone but themselves. Each in her humble sphere exhibits the freedom of moral choice, which is the first step towards human fulfillment.

CHAPTER V

DOMESTIC SERVICE

In Nicholas Nickleby, we come across a place called 'General Agency Office' which is an employment bureau for miscellaneous occupations. One of its major concerns seems to be domestic service: "There were the same unimpeachable masters and mistresses in want of virtuous servants, and the same virtuous servants in want of unimpeachable masters and mistresses" (NN, p. 531). The Agency is engaged in the not very successful attempt of bringing them together, perhaps because the credentials on both sides are rather exaggerated. Domestic service was a widely prevalent social phenomenon in Victorian England; the rich could afford to keep a whole retinue of servants, ranging from the butler and housekeeper to the undergroom and scullery-maid; even lower middle-class families who could afford only one domestic employed a maid-of-all-work. This practice of domestic service gradually diminished with rapid industrialization of the country and increased job opportunities for the poor. Dickens not only takes cognizance of this aspect of society but also makes use of the situation to create some of the most memorable characters in his fiction. His portrayal of domestic servants is characterized by the same diversity that he brings to life in general and gains vitality from that queer combination of comedy and pathos that is so integral a part of Dickens's art. These characters exemplify superlatives of good and evil and a whole spectrum of shades in between. There is Mrs Tickit of Little Dorrit, the truly virtuous servant of the

truly unimpeachable Meagleses; Mrs Boffin of Our Mutual Friend, virtuous servant of the not very commendable Harmon; Peggotty of David Copperfield, virtuous and devoted servant of the simple and misguided Mrs Copperfield; Peg Sliderskew of Nicholas Nickleby, as detestable as her master, Arthur Gride; a whole bevy of "Mrs Crupp's daughter[s] in disguise" (DC, p. 701), adept at the art of deceiving their masters and mistresses; and a few ill-starred children, like the "Marchioness" of The Old Curiosity Shop and the "Orfling," of David Copperfield, prematurely aged in the adult preoccupation of earning their own bread.

Dickens does not object to the principle of domestic labour. He accepts class distinctions as a fact of life and favours the Christian ideal of kindness on the part of the rich and powerful towards the needy and helpless, over and above egalitarian values. He certainly advocates social mobility in Bleak House, through the character of the Ironmaster, but he modifies this outlook with the continuing loyalty of Mrs Rouncewell towards the Dedlocks and George's preference for Sir Leicester's patronage over the prospect of leading a leisured life under his brother's roof. As George Gissing states, referring to particular characters in The Old Curiosity Shop but with more general implications: "Kit was born to be a servant, and a servant let him remain. He shall find a mate worthy of him among his own kind, and their sons shall be Kits over again, their daughters good little Barbaras."[1] Considering the protective and appreciative nature of the Garlands, and the general social conditions outlined in Chapter III of this study, it may not be such a bad idea for daughters of the poor to be "good little Barbaras." Admittedly, not all employers are like the Garlands, but on the whole, women have a secure and fairly comfortable life as domestic servants. It is only children

who are badly exploited by inhuman employers and suffer the most damaging effects of physical privation and psychological intimidation. No adult woman in Dickens's fiction suffers greatly in the role of a domestic servant. On the contrary, many of them form an enduring attachment with the family that employs them and are almost accepted as a member of that family, especially by the children. All three of Mrs Tickit, Mrs Boffin and Peggotty display strong maternal feelings for children belonging to their employers--children who are either motherless, like John Harmon, or have mothers too weak to be emotionally supportive themselves, like David Copperfield, or too faintly individualized to have any role at all, like Pet Meagles. The children reciprocate these feelings with warmth and one can hardly imagine a richer and deeper human relationship than that between the child David and the plump Peggotty who sheds her buttons every time she hugs him, leading him to wonder "whether, if she were employed to lose me like the boy in the fairy tale, I should be able to track my way home again by the buttons she would shed" (DC, p. 76). The lost and lonely spirit of the little boy is often brought home by the memory of that hearty squeeze.

Among the elderly housekeepers, Mrs Tickit occupies a territory between the stately Mrs Rouncewell and the maternal Mrs Boffin. The Meagleses are not aristocratic but they are wealthy; and Mrs Tickit heads a hierarchy of servants, at least one of whom is mentioned by name: "I was waiting longer than customary for my cup of tea which was then preparing by Mary Jane" (LD, p. 583), says Mrs Tickit to Arthur. She serves the Meagleses and is in turn served by the lesser domestics. She is very mindful of the image of her employers. When the Meagleses are in residence, Mrs Tickit functions as cook as well as housekeeper, and

refuses to show herself to visitors in her working clothes, sending up messages that she is "unpresentable at present" (p. 241). In their absence, she dresses up in fine clothes suitable to their status and takes up her faithful station upstairs:

> When they went away, she always put on the silk-gown and the jet-black row of curls . . . established herself in the breakfast-room, put her spectacles between two particular leaves of Doctor Buchan's Domestic Medicine, and sat looking over the blind all day until they came back again. (LD, pp. 241-42)

She finds much gratification in this fiction, turning herself into a part of a pretty tableau reflecting the prosperity of her employers. She is steadfast in her position of trust and will not abandon it to look after her own needs--nor even admit that she has the very human failing of falling asleep. Rather, she insists, "I was more what a person would strictly call watching with my eyes closed" (p. 583). This is because her role as servant takes precedence in her eyes over her self as a person. And this is true of all good servants in Dickens's fiction. Mrs Tickit's duty is to watch the house during her employers' absence and she will not let even her basic bodily needs interfere with the trust she holds--at least she will not own to such a thing having happened.

Pet's marriage and imminent departure causes this good lady much distress. When her feelings become too strong, "she usually sent up secret messages importing that she was not in parlour condition as to her attire, and that she solicited a sight of 'her child' in the kitchen" (p. 454). When Pet arrives, she showers the girl with signs of her affection. Mrs Boffin has the same maternal attachment towards John Harmon. When she believes him to be dead and beyond her services, she tries to regain him in fiction. She decides to adopt a boy and call him

John Harmon: "Now that he is past all benefit of the money, and it's come to us, I should like to find some orphan child, and take the boy and adopt him and give him John's name, and provide for him. Somehow, it would make me easier, I fancy" (p. 146). She wants this boy to be "protected from John's own forlornness" (p. 389). With a mother's eye, she looks through Rokesmith's disguise. Even before she actually knows him, she has a presentiment. She is disturbed by visions the same day that Rokesmith offers himself as Secretary to Mr Boffin: "The old man's face, and it gets younger. The two children's faces, and they get older. A face that I don't know. And then all the faces!" (OMF, p. 140). This prepares her for the final revelation, when she comes upon Rokesmith at an unguarded moment and he looks at her "with a pleased kind of smile in [her] company":

> Too many a time had I seen him sitting lonely, when he was a poor child, to be pitied, heart and hand! Too many a time had I seen him in need of being brightened up with a comforting word! Too many a time to be mistaken, when that glimpse of him come at last! (p. 841)

Not only is Mrs Boffin loving in nature, she has the moral strength to oppose the hard-hearted "Jailor of Harmony Jail" (p. 147) in his lifetime, in regard to his mistreatment of his children:

> While he raged at them and reviled them for opposing him with the speech of the honest and the true, it had scratched his stony heart, and he had perceived the powerlessness of all his wealth to buy them if he had addressed himself to the attempt. (p. 147)

In his characterization of the Boffins, Dickens seems to advocate loyalty in domestic servants, even where loyalty is not deserved. The Boffins remain devoted to the Harmon family, although "the hard wrathful and sordid nature" of the old man "had wrung as much work out of them as

could be got in their best days, for as little money as could be paid to hurry on their worst" (p. 146). They are rewarded finally with acknowledgement in their master's will.

In Peggotty, we see the same moral courage to oppose her opinion to that of her mistress, when she sees the latter being misled by the Murdstones. Before her second marriage, Peggotty tries to dissuade Mrs Copperfield from taking such a step: "No! That it won't do. No! No price could make it do. No!" (DC, p. 69). Afterwards her disapproval takes the form of silent resistance; when Mr Murdstone reminds her that Mrs Copperfield has taken his name now, Peggotty "curtseyed herself out of the room without replying" (p. 95). However, as in the case of the Boffins, Peggotty's inflexibility is totally unselfish. And this is another attribute of the good servants created by Dickens; they serve as a moral example for their employers. When Mrs Copperfield's health begins to suffer, she clings to her old servant ("you are my true friend," p. 168), and is afraid at the idea of her marrying Barkis and leaving her. But Peggotty vehemently dismisses such a possibility: "Peggotty go away from you? I should like to catch her at it!" (p. 164). She speaks as if she were two persons; and that is exactly the role that Dickens ascribes to the ideal servant. Their real self becomes submerged under the obligation of life-long service to their employers; and this duty is not exacted from them. For Mrs Tickit, Mrs Boffin and Peggotty, domestic service is a labour of love, dignified by proud attachment to a single family.

Peggotty's role in David's life deserves to be mentioned with particular emphasis. Not only does she compensate for the shortcomings of his incompetent, real mother, she embodies an ideal that few real

mothers achieve. Philip Collins comments in Dickens and Education on the novelist's assumption that "children when young should have plenty of fun and liberty, and their 'fancy' should be respected and nurtured,"[2] and one is touched by David's grateful remembrance of the three bright shillings "which Peggotty had evidently polished up with whitening, for my greater delight" (p. 113) when he leaves for school, and his joyous recognition of his old plate and silver on his return home:

> I had my own old plate, with a brown view of a man-of-war in full sail upon it, which Peggotty had hoarded somewhere all the time I was away, and would not have had broken, she said, for a hundred pounds. I had my own old mug with David on it, and my own old little knife and fork that wouldn't cut. (p. 163)

Likewise, she cherishes his Crocodile Book all her life, as a part of David's childhood remaining with her while the real child grows up far away. With her constant care, it survives the ravages of time to be shown to David's children:

> There is something bulky in Peggotty's pocket. It is nothing smaller than the Crocodile Book, which is in rather a dilapidated condition by this time, with divers of the leaves torn and stitched across, but which Peggotty exhibits to the children as a precious relic. (p. 947)

And she is nothing less than a grandmother to these children.

Peggotty's service has far-reaching effects. It can be said without exaggeration that she helps David make the one most important decision in his life--to run away to the formidable aunt he has never seen but simply heard of with awe from his mother. When Mrs Copperfield begins to lose her strength and it becomes evident to Peggotty that the boy will be left an orphan soon, at the mercy of the cruel Murdstones, she has the tremendous foresight to recall Miss Betsy Trotwood, who

"vanished like a discontented fairy" (p. 60) the day David was born, and wonders whether she would "be inclined to forgive him now" (for being a boy)--"Now that he's got a brother" (p. 166). Her expression is delicate and subdued, but it speaks volumes about the poor boy's situation. And even though Mrs Copperfield is hurt by this grudging reference to her baby, she is relieved at heart about the future of her older son:

> I think I had some glimpses of the real character of this conversation at the time; but I am sure, now, that the good creature originated it, and took her part in it, merely that my mother might comfort herself with the little contradictory summary in which she had indulged. (p. 168)

When the time comes, David knows where to go. Peggotty puts him in the mind to realize that his aunt is the only person who can lift him out of a life of misery and squalor.

Mrs Tickit, Mrs Boffin and Peggotty are clearly ideal examples of domestic servants. They are devoted to life-long service to <u>one</u> family. Their attachment to that family is so deep that they cannot conceive of transferring their affections to another. Peggotty explains to David why she must marry:

> I think I should be more independent altogether, you see; let alone my working with a better heart in my own house, than I could in anybody else's now. I don't know what I might be fit for, now, as a servant to a stranger. (<u>DC</u>, p. 192)

This sort of loyalty earns for them a sort of claim on their employers, although such a claim often entails the privilege of serving them better. Peggotty is left a considerable amount of money by her deceased husband and she would like nothing better than to use her resources to help David: "And now, my own dear Davy, . . . if, while you're a prentice, you should want any money to spend . . . who has such a good right to ask leave to

lend it to you, as my sweet girl's own old stupid me!" (p. 602). But she has an even stronger claim on David, that she knows he will honour: "And when I'm too deaf, and too lame, and too blind, and too mumbly for want of teeth, to be of any use at all, even to be found fault with, then I shall go to my Davy, and ask him to take me in" (p. 164). In Dickens's world, grateful employers take good care of their faithful retainers. Here, one may mention besides Mrs Boffin, Mrs Rouncewell of Bleak House, and Mrs Rudge of Barnaby Rudge who lives on an allowance from Mr Haredale.

In addition to this system of ideal, secure, old-world values, Dickens creates another world, mainly urban and belonging to a younger generation, that is selfishly competitive and cunningly opportunist. Here, domestic servants come and go, expecting no assurance of future support and offering no loyalty on their part. They are ready to exploit the moment and suffer from no moral compunction whatsoever. They have a shrewd understanding of their mistresses and guide their own actions accordingly. We have a short but revealing glimpse of one such servant in Nicholas Nickleby. Fanny Squeers's maid is well aware of her mistress's susceptibility to flattery and knows when to apply it to gain favour for herself. Piqued by rejection from Nicholas and envious of her friend's beauty, Fanny is brusque with her maid, but

> Some considerable experience prevented the girl from being at all surprised at any outbreak of ill-temper on the part of Miss Squeers. Having a perception of what had occurred in the course of the evening, she changed her mode of making herself agreeable, and proceeded on the indirect tack. (NN, p. 201)

The chosen mode is of course to malign the friend who has wounded Fanny's pride: "if only she knew how wrong she was, and would but set herself right by you, what a nice young woman she might be in time" (p. 202).

Fanhy knows "that what the miserable servant-girl had said was sheer coarse lying flattery, as did the girl herself" (p. 203) but she allows herself to be softened by the fiction all the same. The long line of maids who come to work in the young household of David and Dora are made of the same stuff. They are quick to perceive Dora's naiveté and incompetence in housekeeping and though they have "a written character, as large as a proclamation" (DC, p. 701), this does not prevent them from taking every advantage of the situation.

These servants are well recommended, perhaps by the identical 'General Agency Office' mentioned earlier. They are represented as being capable of doing "everything of a domestic nature that ever I heard of, and a great many things that I never did hear of" (DC, p. 701). Among the latter category is invariably the propensity to steal. When dismissed, they leave without a murmur because they have already made their gains out of "deficient tea-spoons . . . attributable to the dustman" (p. 702) and "little sums . . . borrowed in [David's] name of the tradespeople without authority" (p. 707). What they cannot take, they break; they "generally made a point of falling either up or down the kitchen stairs with the tray, and almost plunged into the parlour, as into a bath, with the tea-things" (p. 707). With their "taste for cordials" purchased in the name of Mrs C., and their attachment to alleged cousins who are taken "handcuffed in a procession that covered our front-garden with ignominy" (p. 707), they keep the young couple in a state of perpetual distress. And thus continues "a long line of Incapables; terminating in a young person of genteel appearance, who went to Greenwich Fair in Dora's bonnet" (p. 707).

An extreme example of the greedy servant is Peg Sliderskew,

whose physical and moral ugliness are only equalled by those of her master. As in the case of the ideal servants discussed before, Peg has a long history of service to one master, but unlike the others', her life is marked by avarice and temptation. One suspects the existence of a sexual relationship between the two, at least a past one, in the light of Peg's strong resentment of Arthur's intended bride. She thinks of herself more as the mistress of the house, rather than as a servant; Newman Noggs "greatly [outrages] the dignity of Peg Sliderskew by brushing past her in the passage without a word of apology or recognition" (NN, p. 771). Arthur Gride's intended marriage threatens her independence and she openly rebels against the idea: "Nobody shall be put over Peg Sliderskew's head after so many years" (p. 766). Arthur Gride has eagerly encouraged her frugality, goading her on with the promise of an inheritance: "'My will, Peg! my will!' says he, 'I'm a bachelor--no friends--no relations, Peg!" (p. 807). She has actually served him with the object of becoming his wife: "And now he's to bring home a new mistress, a baby-faced chit of a girl--if he wanted a wife, the fool, why couldn't he have one suitable to his age and that knew his ways?" (p. 807). With her dream destroyed, Peg resolves to ruin her master, and she does. She steals a box full of incriminating documents possessed by Gride and runs away the night before the wedding. Later, when she meets Squeers, sent by Ralph to recover those documents, she hears "with a malicious relish of her old master's defeat, which made her natural hideousness something quite fearful" (p. 851). To Dickens, this betrayal of the master, evil as he is himself, is an unnatural attribute in a domestic servant and adds to the ugliness of Peg's image.

Dickens displays one other aspect of domestic service and that

is intrinsically pathetic--namely, child labour. No matter whether her employers are kind or cruel, the very notion of a small child obliged to support herself with the toil of tiny hands is painful, and shameful to an adult conscience. Dickens is unusually sensitive on this issue because as a child he was sent by his parents to work in a blacking-factory, pasting labels on bottles, and the experience left an indelible print on his mind. Slater says about his parents, "Of the shock and outrage it caused their son they perhaps never had any idea although their later silence on the subject is suggestive."[3] The child-victim, a frequently recurring image in Dickens's fiction, sometimes makes her appearance as a domestic servant. Mostly, she is an orphan, like the "Orfling" in the Micawber household in David Copperfield; sometimes the child of an unemployed parent, like Charley in Bleak House; sometimes an illegitimate child, disowned by her parents, like the "Marchioness" in The Old Curiosity Shop.

Only a very small portion of David Copperfield is devoted to the "Orfling," but it is enough to reveal the extreme insecurity of her life. She comes from the workhouse and returns there when she has no employment. The Micawbers are kind people but they are insecure themselves. When Mr Micawber is released from the debtor's prison, he decides to go to London and thus the child loses her home with them: "I also bestowed a shilling on the Orfling, who was about to be disbanded" (p. 229). When the Micawbers leave, the two orphans are left "looking vacantly at each other in the middle of the road" and David reflects, "she going back, I suppose, to St Luke's workhouse" (pp. 231-32). The Orfling tries to enliven her existence with fiction, by spending some evenings with David on the London Bridge, listening to stories excitingly

remote from her experience: "The Orfling met me here sometimes, to be told some astonishing fictions respecting the wharves and the Tower; of which I can say no more than that I hope I believed them myself" (p. 223). It is fiction again that begins a strange communion between Sally Brass's small, starved maid-servant and the light-hearted and fanciful Dick Swiveller. He plays cards with her in the damp, dirty kitchen and makes believe that it is a palace, and she is a Marchioness to whom he pays elaborate compliments: "merely observing, Marchioness, that since life like a river is flowing, I care not how fast it rolls on, ma'am, on, while . . . such eyes light the waves as they run" (OCS, p. 530). The child understands nothing of this fancy, nor the comic transformation of her wretched condition; only that, for the first time in her life, someone has spoken kindly to her.

The characterization of the Marchioness is a powerful one, rendered the more touching by her complete unawareness of herself as a child. She states her duties in a matter-of-fact manner, expecting neither surprise nor sympathy: "I do plain cooking . . . I'm housemaid too; I do all the work of the house" (p. 332). In this child, one sees two defensive forces urging her towards self-survival--fear and cunning. She follows Sally's instructions to the letter, dreading the consequences of disobedience. When Quilp comes for a visit and stops to write a note for the Brasses, she follows his moves with concentration: "the small servant, carefully tutored for such emergencies, looked on, with her eyes wide open, ready, if he so much as abstracted a wafer, to rush into the street and give the alarm to the police" (p. 473). But Quilp sees something else; when asked if she is treated badly, "the small servant, with a look of infinite cunning, mingled with fear, screwed up her mouth

very tight and round, and nodded violently" (p. 473). She has furtive ways about her to elude Sally's watchfulness, so that she may satisfy the promptings of hunger and loneliness. She looks through key-holes to discover the whereabouts of the key to the kitchen-safe: "I wouldn't have taken much, if I had found it--only enough to squench my hunger" (p. 532). She also does it because it is "very dull, down stairs" (p. 526) and once, while engaged thus, she is discovered by Dick Swiveller. The friendship that follows changes both. The grateful child nurses Swiveller devotedly when he is ill and he is so touched as to turn overnight into a man with a serious purpose in life. They save Kit with information she has gathered from listening through the key-hole. And Dick sends the girl to school to become Sophronia Sphynx, whom he eventually marries.

The prematurely aged children form the only group of domestic servants who are presented as victims of social exploitation in Dickens's fiction. Where older women are concerned, he takes for granted that the servants' interests should be identified with those of their masters or mistresses. Peggotty even has the same name as her mistress, Clara, and quite characteristically gives up her own claim to it. Domestic servants seem to have no fixed hours and can be held in attendance at all times. But the fact of constant service is scarcely remarkable in servants who voluntarily subjugate their identities to their social role. They even relinquish their life's savings to aid their employers. As in the case of superior moral understanding among good servants, one sees here a reversal of the role of protector/dependant. We notice more often the circumstance of servants giving money to their employers, than vice versa.

Compared with sempstresses and factory workers, domestic

servants have a stable, comfortable life. These women are peculiarly free from conflicts of a psychological nature. Ideal servants believe in the system that gives them a subordinate, social position and are proud of their role. The unscrupulous and the self-serving carry on their dishonest deeds without a regret. The children are too young to comprehend fully the extent of their social deprivation; their unquestioning acceptance of their condition is not the least indication of the damage done to them by irresponsible or unfeeling adults.

CHAPTER VI

THE ARTS

The tendency to create fictions has been seen to be a persistent trend among working women in Dickens's fiction. As such, it is appropriate that this study should terminate with a close look at some women artists. The profession of the artist--painter, actress and dancer--publicly brings to the foreground the illusion that exists implicitly and privately in the lives of other women. We have observed how fiction helps to redefine reality for the more active female Dickensian characters. If art is a representation of life, as indeed it was believed to be in the nineteenth century, then the fictions it creates are lifelike in more ways than one. Because life is made up of fictions just as art is inspired by life, and the imagination forming so essential a part of human reality, art reveals the generative forces in the very process of its being. To Dickens, imagination is a form of self-assertion. When the individual tends to become submerged under social pressures, imagination serves as a liberating force. Just as pain is the body's physiological defense against physical danger, so fiction is the mind's defense against psychological damage. However, fiction must be perceived as illusion to be constructive. When truly recognized, fiction is like a tame pet providing diversion from the tensions of existence; when misconceived as truth, it becomes a destructive monster. For example, Amy Dorrit's fiction renews her strength so that she can be of use to others but Mrs Clennam's fiction destroys Arthur's parents and blights his own youth.

For many of the women we have seen in the earlier chapters, fiction serves a vital function. For women rendered weak by conflicts or despondent by self-suppression, personal fantasies are strong supports to lean on. Thus Dickens's world reflects role-playing in subtler and more diverse ways than the simple character-types referred to by John Holloway:

> Child, Evil Old Man, Ruffian, Jack-in-the-Office, Cruel Nurse, Madman, Woman Criminal with a Heart, Spy--these characters in the novel are of course more than commedia del l'arte types in society. They are more than that, through the intensity of their realization, which presumably does not warrant labouring; but the crucial point is that veritably they are the opposite of members of society. Once again, membership of society and social causality are mesmerized into uniqueness and drama. The characters are roles in society, not members of it simply.[1]

It is fair to assume that Dickens imbues the artistic professions with an exaggerated response to the same role-playing devices that abound in life as he sees it.

Dickens's treatment of artists is for the most part comic; the most striking example is the Crummles's provincial theatre-group in Nicholas Nickleby. Yet, if one pauses to review the episode of Nicholas's brief sojourn with this group, some facts emerge about the problems and compromises involved in the acting profession, that seem seriously intended. The same is true about Miss La Creevy, the miniature-painter in the same novel, whose artistic principles are more amusing than edifying but who is herself presented as a dedicated and hard-working professional. In his later novels, Dickens grows progressively more sensitive in his handling of artists. Fanny Dorrit in Little Dorrit is a very problematic character; much as she annoys the reader with her selfish persecution of Amy and her haughty ways, her triumph over the snobbish Mrs Merdle wins her hearty applause. And the fiercely outspoken Jenny

Wren of Our Mutual Friend is quite heroic in the way she conquers physical pain and struggles to support herself and her drunken father.

The theatre is one place that offers equal opportunities to men and women. Not only that, a woman's sexual image is in no way threatened by her role as an actress. On the contrary, the stage heightens her attractiveness and indulges her vanity. Dressed in her costume and irradiated by the stage lights, she is transformed into a creature of surpassing beauty:

> If Nicholas had been astonished at the alteration for the better which the gentlemen displayed, the transformation of the ladies was still more extraordinary. When, from a snug corner of the manager's box, he beheld Miss Snevellicci in all her glories of white muslin with a gold hem, . . . and Miss Bravassa in all the sweetness of Miss Snevellicci's confidential friend, and Miss Belvawney in the white silks of a page . . . he could scarcely contain his admiration. (NN, p. 378)

Consequently, fiction is not used to bridge the gap between an actress's self-image and her professional role, as is the case with most of the working women examined earlier. Rather, fiction serves to extend the actress's theatrical role into her everyday life. Of the Crummleses, Angus Wilson comments: "Nowhere does Dickens pay such splendid tribute to the theatre as in this description of the little world of the fourth-rate touring company. He gets full effect from their absurdities, their vanities, and their egotism."[2] Mrs Crummles is the absurdest of the absurd. She lives with a permanent theatrical pose; she speaks "in a sepulchral voice" and walks "as tragic actresses cross when they obey a stage direction" (NN, p. 363). She performs a tragic part on her way home from the theatre: "Mrs Crummles trod the pavement as if she were going to immediate execution with an animating consciousness of innocence and that heroic fortitude which virtue alone inspires" (p. 371). All

other members of the troupe assume their own preferred appearance, gestures and expressions. Among the other actresses are Miss Snevellicci, who "always played some part in blue silk knee-smalls" (p. 368); Miss Ledrook, who makes an effort to do some sewing "in the most natural manner possible"; Miss Belvawney, who usually went on as a page in white silk hose, to stand with one leg bent and contemplate the audience"; Miss Bravassa, who "once had her likeness taken 'in character'"; and Ninetta Crummles or the Infant Phenomenon, whose age has been fixed at ten years "certainly for five good years" (p. 365). They are joined by "the unrivalled Henrietta Petowker, of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane" (p. 393). Mr Crummles is rapturous in his compliment to this last named acquisition, who carries with her all the glamour of the capital city: "she's the only sylph I ever saw who could stand upon one leg, and play the tambourine on her other knee, like a sylph" (p. 393). So far, there is nothing but amusement at the expense of shallow artifice, ignorance and extreme self-importance.

However, with all their petty vanities, the Crummleses are dedicated professionals who are shown at length during the actual performance of their work. Their artistic endeavours are alike viewed as real struggles to maintain their place within the social framework. If we look closer into the reason behind their aggressive use of artifice, we discover the importance of a public image in the theatrical business. The success of an actress depends not only on her talent but also on her popularity off-stage. As a result, she goes to great lengths to create an impression and retain it. Once an actress attains a certain popularity, she cannot risk losing it for any consideration. Her real life must be hidden behind the screen of her public image, and this is an indispensable

fiction in an actress's life. Even marriage can reduce the glamour associated with a romantic heroine; and so, as Mr Lillyvick declares, "Actresses . . . always keep their maiden names, that's the regular thing" (p. 397). With the same eye to popularity, she has actively to court the patronage of the more affluent members of society. Nicholas accompanies Miss Snevellicci in one such attempt at "a little canvassing . . . . Among the patrons" (p. 380). The result is disheartening. Mr Curdle, one gentleman whose home they visit, limits his patronage to flattery ("we confer the distinction merely upon Miss Snevellicci," p. 387); when it comes to purchasing tickets for her show, he offers sixpence short and expects in exchange much more than seats for his family:

> Poor Miss Snevellicci took the three half-crowns with many smiles and bends, and Mrs Curdle, adding several supplementary directions relative to keeping the places for them, and dusting the seat, and sending two clean bills as soon as they came out, rang the bell as a signal for breaking up the conference. (NN, p. 387)

Angus Wilson makes an allusion to this dearth of patronage for the theatre-group, as a possible reason for their poor performance:

> Vanity is their mainspring, as it must be for all theatre people who are offering what is so poor; but they know that what they offer has its spring in fancy and imagination, which make it worth more than all the values of the wretched local bourgeoisie to whom they have to beg for patronage. Not one, not themselves, can say how much of what they do and say is sheer fraud, for who can say how much better they could realize their dreams of being true artists if circumstances were not so hard, if they had larger and more discriminating audiences, if they didn't have to make purses all the time out of sow's ears?[3]

The theatrical eccentricities of an actress are surely the outcome of her compelling need to attract attention.

An actress has to struggle against adverse circumstances even within the troupe to which she belongs. Miss Snevellicci appears to have real talent; she is the only actress in whose performance Nicholas seems truly impressed: "Miss Snevellicci in particular was uncommonly good" (p. 379). Yet, she is constantly played down in the interest of the Infant Phenomenon. Mr Folair, an actor, complains to Nicholas:

> She may thank her stars she was born a manager's daughter . . . . Isn't it enough to make a man crusty to see that little sprawler put up in the best business every night, and actually keeping money out of the house, by being forced down the people's throats, while other people are passed over? Isn't it extraordinary to see a man's confounded family conceit blinding him even to his own interest? (p. 366)

Mr Folair's motive in attacking Mr Crummles's family conceit is of course self-praise but his complaint, in itself, is justified. Miss Snevellicci, at least, has to play in the shadow of Ninetta Crummles even though she is a better actress. Her light is also subdued by the glare of the London actress, Henrietta Petowker. A young actress without patronage of influential people or the cooperation of the theatre-manager is thus seen to have a hard struggle to make her place on the stage.

Even the envied Ninetta is scarcely to be envied, if one stops to consider the price she pays for her greater claim on the footlights. Her parents have deliberately stunted her growth, so that her mediocre skills may have the greater impact on the public as wonderful feats of a precocious child. The narrator shares with his readers the secret of Ninetta's diminutive stature: "she had been kept up late every night, and put upon an unlimited allowance of gin-and-water from infancy, to prevent her growing tall, and perhaps this system of training had produced in the infant phenomenon these additional phenomena" (p. 365). She is a

victim of her fictional child-image. She has to be tolerated by all the members of the troupe, "as she was the manager's daughter" (p. 384), but in her turn Ninetta is obliged to endure ill-treatment at the hands of children, whose parents are patrons of her profession:

> there resided the six children who were so enraptured with the public actions of the phenomenon, and who . . . proceeded to poke their fingers into her eyes, and tread upon her toes, and show her many other little attentions peculiar to their time of life. (pp. 387-88)

Poor Miss Crummles is as much a victim of her profession's strategies as she is a privileged member of her father's theatre-company.

A career based thus on public appreciation is decidedly an insecure one. Furthermore, an aura of disrepute hangs about the stage in Dickens's time, and the novelist himself is not free from prejudice in this matter. Slater tells us that, "For all the respect and adulation accorded to particular actresses in the mid-Victorian period the stage was not an acceptable career for a middle-class young lady--acceptable to her class and family, that is."[4] When his daughter, Katey, considered becoming an actress, Dickens was "adamant that she should not embark on an acting career";[5] however, Katey's interest in art gradually made her father more sympathetic towards artists. One notices a marked difference between the characterizations of Henrietta Petowker in Nicholas Nickleby (1838-39) and Fanny Dorrit in Little Dorrit (1855-57). The former is cruel and conniving for no better reason than that she wants a husband; the latter has a strong motivation to be crafty. Fanny is humiliated by Mrs Merdle and she reacts by plotting vengeance upon the snobbish lady.

Fanny is a dancer; the theatre where she works has "a furtive sort of door, with a curious up-all-night air about it, that appeared to

be ashamed about itself and to be hiding in an alley" (LD, p. 278). She is expected, as a matter of course, to gratify the pleasures of frivolous young men of rich families but she is not considered respectable enough to be a bride for one of them. When Fanny attracts Edmund Sparkler, his mother reminds the dancer of her social position in no uncertain terms. Addressing Amy, Mrs Merdle says:

> It is quite unnecessary to say . . . that the stage sometimes has a fascination for young men of that class of character. In saying the stage, I mean the people on it of the female sex. Therefore, when I heard that my son was supposed to be fascinated by a dancer, I knew what that usually meant in Society . . . . But when I found that your sister, by rejecting my son's advances . . . had brought him to the point of proposing marriage, my feelings were of the profoundest anguish--acute. (LD, p. 286)

Fanny is greedy enough to be bought off, but she does not allow herself to forget this insult. After Mr Dorrit inherits a vast fortune, Fanny uses her new-found power to avenge her past wrong. Despite her immense dislike of Sparkler, she decides to marry him to get even with his mother: "I know that I wish to have a more defined and distinct position, in which I can assert myself with greater effect against that insolent woman . . . . I would oppose her in everything, and compete with her. I would make it the business of my life" (p. 650). Mrs Merdle's treatment of Fanny is presented as a real grievance in the novel and when the latter reciprocates the ill-feeling with machinations of her own, it all fits well into the general design of social victimization that Dickens constructs for Little Dorrit. His treatment of this issue of the actress's reputation is quite different in Nicholas Nickleby. The Kenwigses are afraid of their daughter's becoming an actress when she grows up: "if she grew up what she is now,--only think of the young dukes and marquises" (p. 238). In

these words, as in Miss Petowker's declaration, "but I have never found any inconvenience or unpleasantness of that sort" (p. 238), one detects a secret longing for such attention. In Little Dorrit, Dickens attacks the very same social prejudice that he seems to share at the time of writing Nicholas Nickleby.

Besides the actresses, there is another artist in Nicholas Nickleby--Miss La Creevy. In Slater's words, "Miss La Creevy is a sympathetic, even touching, character as a woman, but her art is simply a joke."[6] Her concept of art is, indeed, rather limited: "the very essence of a good portrait is, that it must be either serious or smirking, or it's no portrait at all" (NN, p. 179). However, it is not quite right to dismiss Miss La Creevy's art as a mere joke, because she practices it with a serious devotion that does her credit. Besides, regardless of her somewhat gaudy taste, she brings to her profession a rich imagination and a joyous enthusiasm. Impressed with Kate Nickleby's face, she loses no time in persuading her to sit for a portrait, and there is a scene in the novel that shows Miss La Creevy in the process of painting "the sweetest portrait [she has] ever done" (p. 179). She works patiently to obtain the exact shade of a colour she requires to produce an intended effect. We learn from the artist that when she has sitters less handsome than Kate, her imagination is taxed extensively to enhance the appearance of her subjects: "What with bringing out eyes with all one's power, and keeping down noses with all one's force, and adding to heads, and taking away teeth altogether, you have no idea of the trouble one little miniature is" (p. 179). That she willingly takes this trouble to produce a truly satisfying portrait makes her a dedicated professional. One may want to denounce Miss La Creevy as a painter of stylized portraits, but

it must be observed that she is what her clients make her. Among the unsophisticated middle class, there is a demand only for stereotyped portraits. Miss La Creevy's sitters do not understand fine art any better than the miniaturist does; neither do they wish to see a true representation of themselves on canvas. What they expect is simply an idealized version of themselves, "smirking" or "serious," just as it suits their fancy. The artist's "bright salmon flesh-tint" (p. 179) is just right for individuals "who hire a uniform coat to be painted in" (p. 180).

While the actresses flaunt their fiction publicly, as a means of gaining social recognition, Miss La Creevy uses fiction as a private outlet for suppressed feelings. She is a lonely woman of "straitened circumstances" (p. 318); she lets out part of her lodgings to supplement the yields of her artistic pursuit but still fails to earn a sufficient income to live according to her tastes. A monotonous life of labour, without the relief of congenial company, tends to embitter a person but Miss La Creevy preserves herself from destructive melancholy by talking to herself. It is as if she has a double, lurking within her brain, who satisfies her need for companionship:

> The little bustling, active, cheerful creature, existed entirely within herself, made a confidant of herself, was as sarcastic as she could be, on people who offended her, by herself; pleased herself, and did no harm. If she indulged in scandal, nobody's reputation suffered; and if she enjoyed a little bit of revenge, no living soul was one atom the worse. (p. 318)

When Miss La Creevy takes a message to Mme Mantalini's, she encounters Miss Knag and takes an instant dislike to her. She remains polite in the latter's presence but, out of hearing, she gives vent to her true feelings: "I wish I had the painting of her: I'd do her justice" (p. 318).

Thus she takes revenge on Miss Knag for speaking slightingly of Kate; this piece of harmless fiction allows her to rise above an unpleasant experience and she greatly relishes her secret joke.

Jenny Wren of Our Mutual Friend is another kind soul who uses fiction to relieve her mind of regrets--and regrets she has many, "because my back's so bad, and my legs are so queer" (OMF, p. 272). She is a deformed child who earns a living by making doll's dresses, ornamental pincushions and pen-wipers. She is a truly heroic character, "child in years, . . . woman in self-reliance and trial" (p. 498), whose wasted bodily strength is revived with increased vigour in her sharp eyes, quick wit and dexterous hands. When she is introduced to the reader, she is busy with her craft:

> the little figure went on with its work of gumming and gluing together with a camel's-hair brush certain pieces of cardboard and thin wood, previously cut into various shapes. The scissors and knives upon the bench showed that the child herself had cut them; and the bright scraps of velvet and silk and ribbon also strewn upon the bench showed that when duly stuffed (and stuffing too was there), she was to cover them smartly. The dexterity of her nimble fingers was remarkable . . . as she brought two thin edges accurately together by giving them a little bite. (p. 272)

Jenny's occupation involves more than cutting, gluing and stitching; the most demanding aspect of her work is "the trying-on by the great ladies" (p. 495). The sickly child drags herself to "the Park, or a Show, or a Fête" (p. 495) to observe richly clad ladies, in order that she may copy the designs for her dolls' dresses. She risks exposure to the weather and danger of being run over by carriage wheels, in her pursuit of an idea. Seated at her bench, she spends long hours giving it a form.

Jenny knows not only the pain of a physical handicap, but also the cruelty of thoughtless people around her. However, instead of feeling

sorry for herself, she assumes a pose of superiority that serves to keep up her spirits. The sight of a fine lady does not overwhelm her with regrets about social disparity; rather, she pretends: "I am making a perfect slave of her, with making her try on my doll's dress" (p. 496). In the same way, she assumes the role of a parent to her irresponsible father and the additional burden of being "the person of the house" (p. 271). Her father has no scruple against leaning on her weak shoulders, and the neighbourhood children taunt her on account of her defect. She punishes the insensitive world, with "their tricks and their manners" (p. 274), by inflicting imaginary tortures on a fictive husband-to-be: "I'd make a spoon red hot, and I'd have some boiling liquor bubbling in a saucepan, and I'd take it out hissing, and I'd open his mouth with the other hand . . . and I'd pour it down his throat, and blister it and choke him" (p. 294). This fantasy obviously originates in her exasperation with her drunken father. At heart, she is more forgiving--even of the idle, because she believes that sloth brings with it its own punishment: "I had nothing to do but work, and so I worked. I couldn't play. But my poor unfortunate child could play, and it turned out the worse for him" (p. 801). Here Dickens makes a very strong statement about the saving power of work.

There is absolutely no mockery in Dickens's treatment of Jenny's art. On the contrary, the real world is curiously evoked on the diminutive scale of the doll's world. When Jenny complains about the dolls she dresses, that "they take no care of their clothes, and they never keep to the same fashions a month" (p. 273), one instantly recalls the pale, work-worn sempstresses in Nicholas Nickleby, who labour all day to meet the changing fancies of fashionable ladies. When Eugene tries to

win Jenny's confidence by requesting a doll for an imaginary godchild, she immediately fathoms his intention to possess Lizzie and replies to him in his own language: "You are sure to break it. All you children do" (p. 286). Discovered and discouraged, Eugene is nevertheless impressed with the child's wisdom, derived from bitter struggles, and comforts her with a sadly ironic observation about her doll's world: "If we all set to work as soon as we could use our hands, it would be all over with the dolls' dressmakers" (p. 289). Even Jenny's father becomes Mr Dolls. The entire social construct represented by the Veneerings is an artificial doll's world, that needs to be dressed up by the patient toils of the working masses.

Jenny's art is not just symbolic; it has a mystical, regenerative function in the novel. It has taught her the power of illusion and she has a vision that eases her suffering. She sees a host of angelic children who come to lift her up and make her light:

> Such numbers of them, too! All in white dresses, and with something shining on the borders, and on their heads, that I have never been able to imitate with my work, though I know it so well. They used to come down in long bright slanting rows, and say all together, "Who is this in pain! Who is this in pain!" (OMF, p. 290)

Jenny's art does not quite reach that height of spiritual glory, but it is distinctly the means of aspiring to it. Later in the novel, when Eugene is mutilated and in terrible pain, he asks for Jenny's help to attain to that level of spiritual resignation. Eugene's friend, Mortimer, looks in wonder at the dolls' dressmaker, "as if she were an interpreter between the sentient world and the insensible man" (p. 809). Jenny conveys to the living the barely audible messages of a man almost dead; only the artist is able to reach into the shadowy realm between death and

life. Dickens's attitude to artists is greatly transformed from the comic portrayal of the Crummles to the spiritually revitalizing art of Jenny Wren.

CONCLUSION

George Orwell expresses great disappointment in Charles Dickens because of his apparent ignorance of the working class:

> Dickens had had vivid glimpses of "low life" . . . and he was also a popular novelist and able to write about ordinary people . . . . He has no difficulty in introducing the common motives, love, ambition, avarice, vengeance and so forth. What he does not noticeably write about, however, is work.[1]

Some of the things that Orwell disapproves of in Dickens are his dislike of rebellion, his unquestioning acceptance of private property and patronage, his preference for "a bourgeois exterior and a bourgeois . . . accent"[2] for seriously-intended characters even if they belong to the working class, and above all, the moral bent of his social criticism. Many of the above allegations are true, especially the last. However, these do not necessarily lead to the assumption that Dickens is not concerned with work. My study leaves out half the population of the Dickensian world--the male, the portion particularly afflicted with the curse of Adam--and yet reveals a long list of characters, whose lives are visibly defined by their work. Orwell also observes that "Dickens sees human beings with the most intense vividness, but he sees them always in private life, as 'characters,' not as functional members of society; that is to say, he sees them statically."[3] All the women I have discussed under various categories of work are precisely that, namely, "functional members of society." They all work to support themselves, and in so doing, they keep in motion the entire social apparatus that depends on human labour. Their activities also challenge another remark of Orwell, that "In

Dickens's novels anything in the nature of work happens off-stage."[4] Many of Dickens's characters, like Miss La Creevy, Miss Mowcher and Jenny Wren, are introduced to the reader with a detailed description of their professional activity. Even Amy Dorrit, whose role as the guiding angel of her family overshadows her professional interest, is shown quietly at work in Flora's house: "Her earnestness was so expressive of her being uneasy without her work, that Flora . . . produced a basket of white handkerchiefs. Little Dorrit gladly put it by her side, took out her little pocket-housewife, threaded the needle, and began to hem" (LD, pp. 330-31). Amy's occupation finds a significantly detailed portrayal. One may also side-step a little to mention a male character shown industriously at work in his forge--Gabriel Varden of Barnaby Rudge.

Orwell is particularly offended at Dickens's depiction of the labour union in Hard Times; the workers' leader, Slackbridge, "substituted cunning for their simplicity, and passion for their safe, solid sense" (HT, p. 170). Stephen Blackpool's refusal to join the labour union clearly establishes Dickens's stance, and Orwell complains: "There is not a line in the book that can properly be called socialist; indeed, its tendency if anything is pro-capitalist, because its whole moral is that capitalists ought to be kind, not that workers ought to be rebellious."[5] If the only sign of appreciation for work is to provide incentive for rebellion, Dickens surely does not understand work. But this is a narrow, biased view of the working populace. Dickens shows a very sympathetic understanding of scores of individual workers, in different walks of life, who toil quietly and steadily, with or without adequate reward, and quite distinctly celebrates the principle of labour. Similarly, Orwell's claim that the working class "come into his books chiefly as servants, and

comic servants at that"[6] is too simplistic a generalization, that I hope is invalidated by the preceding chapters. However, Orwell is quite right in pointing out that Dickens favours "a change of spirit rather than a change of structure,"[7] where social reform is concerned. He even suggests that, in light of the excesses encouraged by orthodox schools of thought, Dickens's moderate liberalism may not be such a bad thing, after all. As a result, Orwell ends his essay with what appears to be a compliment to the novelist; he says that, behind the pages of Dickens's books appears "the face of a man who is generously angry--in other words, of a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls."[8]

Alexander Welsh is another writer who comments on Dickens's notion of work and finds him deficient and somewhat confused. Welsh is not as radical as Orwell; he is willing to own that Dickens believes in the principle of self-help but easily attributes this to the "earnestness" of the Victorians:

> The Victorians tirelessly preached the necessity of work and of 'earnestness'--the term that conveys their sense of the importance of work to the character. One of the few virtues within the reach of the lower classes, work can be safely recommended to all classes.[9]

Welsh is correct insofar as he points to the moral texture of Dickens's concept of work, but he errs in not looking beyond. He may even be justified in claiming that "the protagonists of the novels depend not at all on work, and only sporadically on good works, to make their way through the world."[10] This is true of many of Dickens's major characters, but most of the lesser characters depend on work. And we may cite at least four female characters examined in this study--Kate Nickleby, Mary

Graham, Amy Dorrit and Lizzie Hexam--who are protagonists, and who undeniably make their way through the world by hard, honest labour. The main reason why Welsh finds Dickens's ideal of work difficult to accept is that he often undermines this principle by providing his genteel characters with rich inheritances and his plebian characters with charity. Welsh specifically locates a moral confusion in the conception of Our Mutual Friend:

> 'Rokesmith', the disguised hero of Our Mutual Friend, gives it as his opinion that Betty Higden's independence ought to be respected. But his reverence for Betty's independence is not thought to conflict in any way with the prospect that he and Bella Wilfer will live happily ever after on unearned income.[11]

It must be borne in mind that Rokesmith is not only capable of working as Secretary to Mr Boffin, he feels no degradation in serving his father's old retainer. As for his inheritance--unless one raises the Marxist objection to the very idea of private property, there exists no rationale against his acquiring of his father's possessions, nor against Bella's sharing of her husband's wealth.

Work is an important consideration even in Dickens's early novels. I have mentioned in Chapter III that, in The Old Curiosity Shop, I perceive the gradual fading away of Nell's desire to live as being directly caused by her inability to find an anchorage in purposeful activity. In Nicholas Nickleby, Kate is emphatic in her resolution "to earn, literally, [her] bread" (NN, p. 182) though her determination appears a little weakened by a fond wish for her brother's success: "Whether we shall ever taste happiness again, depends upon the fortunes of my dear brother" (p. 182). It is true that in Martin Chuzzlewit, a disobedient grandson is eventually forgiven and rewarded with an

inheritance, but not before he owns the superiority of Mark Tapley and Tom Pinch, two working men whom he has pretended to patronize in the past. And the young writer of David Copperfield is obviously a protagonist who labours to make his way through the world. However, in these novels belonging to the early and middle periods of Dickens's literary career, the notion of work is exalted in isolated episodes; and the total force of evidence in favour of inheritance, patronage and charity greatly reduces the impression of work as an essential factor in human dignity. Even Bleak House, which directly attacks the individual's desire for inheritance, is marred by the fact that Mr Jarndyce is never seen to work; however, one should remember Mr Woodcourt, the doctor who works tirelessly among the poor. It is only in his last novels that Dickens introduces 'work' as a dominant theme. In Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend, fortune is persistently identified with illusion--the "bran-new" (OMF, p. 48) shine of the Veneering establishment, the dust-heaps of Harmon, the false expectations of the Lammles, the fraudulent shares of Mr Merdle, the suppressed will of the Clennams and the sudden, short-lived wealth of Mr Dorrit. Set against social ambition are the simple faith and incessant industry of Amy Dorrit, Arthur Clennam and the Plornishes of Little Dorrit and Lizzie Hexam, Jenny Wren and Riah of Our Mutual Friend.

In Little Dorrit, Dickens gives the fullest representation of the idea of work. He expresses his opinions negatively through Mrs Clennam's joyless vision of work as atonement, through the Dorrit family's genteel aversion to work and working people, through the mysterious nature of Mr Merdle's work ("nobody knew with the least precision what Mr Merdle's business was," p. 445), through Gowan, the idle artist who so contrasts with the earnest Miss La Creevy, and through the Circumlocution

Office's systematic discouragement of work with the motto, "How not to do it" (p. 145). His positive statements find expression through the patient toil of Amy and Arthur, Mr Meagles and Daniel Doyce, the Plornishes and even the retarded Maggy. The attempt to evade work causes the major catastrophes in the novel, like the Merdle speculation in which even Arthur stakes his all. The absence of work is the worst emptiness of all; in her travels with the family, Amy discovers that "To have no work to do was strange" (p. 516). Work is necessary to give one purpose in life, and in its absence self-indulgence becomes a prison, no less oppressive than the Marshalsea. After all the turmoil caused by greed subsides, the opportunity for work provides the only promise of stability. The novel does not end with the customary material rewards for the deserving characters, as in Dickens's earlier novels. Amy and Arthur are both impoverished and what binds them together is their faith in work. The reader gets no glorified image of their married life but only that they

> Went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness. . . . They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in the sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar. (p. 895)

As subject-matter for his art, work offers a strong stimulant to Dickens's creative imagination. One does not notice much difference in the characterization of his domestic heroines; they are, more or less, fashioned out of the same mould. Each of his working women is a distinct individual, with her own peculiarities of dress, speech and manner. Usually these eccentricities arouse laughter but comedy, far from making a character seem trivial, makes her more entertaining. Above all, the working woman's capacity for fiction reflects Dickens's own creativity.

And how does work affect the women themselves in Dickens's fiction? It is beyond doubt an educational experience. Domestic women, sheltered and provided for, live in a state of childlike ignorance. Forced to make a living, even a child gains practical wisdom: "The dolls' dressmaker had become a little, quaint shrew; of the world, worldly; of the earth, earthy" (OMF, p. 294). The domestic woman's naiveté and the working woman's knowledge of the world are effectively juxtaposed through the characterizations of Mrs Nickleby and Miss La Creevy. Mrs Nickleby depends on others for information pretaining to the world outside her home and is easily persuaded: "Happy Mrs Nickleby! A project had but to be new, and it came home to her mind brightly varnished and gilded as a glittering toy" (NN, p. 195). Miss La Creevy derives her facts from her professional experience and forms correct judgements. When she hears of Kate's employment at Mme Mantalini's, she declares: "'I am afraid it is an unhealthy occupation . . . . I recollect getting three young milliners to sit to me when I first began to paint, and I remember that they were all very pale and sickly'" (p. 194). This idea of childlike ignorance being fostered by idleness is fully developed in Our Mutual Friend. Jenny Wren equates the idle and the thoughtless with children and dolls. Much as Dickens admires the angel in the house, he is very aware of the limitations of an entirely domestic existence. Lacking in challenge, domesticity prevents a woman from maturing. She grows older without gaining in wisdom. The adorable Flora Casby inevitably degenerates into the "diffuse and silly" (LD, p. 191) Flora Finching, and that is a tremendous waste.

NOTES

Introduction

[1]Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic (London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 17.

[2]Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark, Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins, and the Victorian Sexual System (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.

[3]Patricia Stubbs, Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1979), p. 7.

[4]Stubbs, p. 6.

[5]Stubbs, p. 19.

[6]Barickman, MacDonald and Stark, p. 3.

[7]Stubbs, p. 5. In a footnote, Stubbs adds that "The 1851 census showed that women considerably outnumbered men and that it was therefore statistically impossible for every girl to marry."

[8]Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), p. 175. All other quotations from Dickens's novels are taken from this series of publications, and will be identified henceforth by abbreviated titles and page numbers, in parentheses directly following each quotation.

[9]Barickman, MacDonald and Stark, p. 5.

[10]Stubbs, p. 7.

[11]E. D. Pendry, The New Feminism of English Fiction (Tokyo: The Kenkyusha Press, 1956), p. 14.

[12]Gilbert and Gubar, p. 17.

[13]Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1983).

Chapter I

[1]Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1983), pp. 360-61.

[2]Grahame Smith, Dickens, Money and Society (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 156.

[3]Ross H. Dabney, Love and Property in the Novels of Dickens (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 95-96.

[4]Steven Marcus, Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 99.

[5]Slater, p. 241.

[6]Mabell Smith, Studies in Dickens (Chautauqua, N.Y.: Chautauqua Press, 1910), p. 130.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Slater, p. 227.

[9]Edwin Charles, Some Dickens Women (London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd., 1926), p. 73.

[10]Slater, p. 241.

[11]George Gissing, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (London: Blackie and Son Limited, 1926).

[12]Dorothy Van Ghent, "The Dickens World: A View from Todgers's," in The Dickens Critics, ed. George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1961), p. 228.

[13]Ibid., p. 229.

Chapter II

[1]Philip Collins, Dickens and Education (London: Macmillan and Company, 1964), p. 124.

[2]Collins, p. 124.

[3]Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1983), p. 5.

[4]Slater, p. 21.

[5]Philip Collins remarks:

> By "well-taught," [Dickens] meant, largely, instructed in the domestic crafts and responsibilities equally relevant to a comfortably-off Esther Summerson, . . . or to a working-class girl like Charley Neckett or Sissy Jupe. Certainly, girls should be taught to read; but domestic competence was far more important than intellectual or imaginative range. (Dickens and Education, p. 128)

[6]J. S. Mill, The Subjection of Women (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1889), p. 52.

[7]Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Women (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1929), p. 59.

[8]Collins, p. 127.

[9]George Gissing, Critical Studies of the Works of Dickens (New York: Haskell House, 1965), p. 125.

[10]Slater, p. 231.

[11]Slater, p. 324.

[12]Slater, p. 330.

[13]Slater, p. 368.

Chapter III

[1]Steven Marcus, Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 98.

[2]Michael Slater, "Dickens's Trace for the Times," in Dickens Centenary Essays, 1970, ed. Michael Slater (London: Chapman and Hall, 1970), p. 99.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1983), pp. 328-29.

[5]K. J. Fielding and Anne Smith, "Hard Times and Factory Controversy," in Dickens Centennial Essays, ed. Ada Nisbet and Blake Nevius (London: University of California Press, 1971), p. 24.

[6]Raymond Williams, "Dickens and Social Ideas," in Dickens Centenary Essays, ed. Michael Slater (London: Chapman and Hall, 1970), pp. 91-92.

[7]Angus Wilson, The World of Charles Dickens (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1970), p. 236.

[8]Michael Slater, Dickens and Women, p. 285.

[9]Here we have a further indication of Dickens's idealization of factory work in Our Mutual Friend; it is hardly the kind of occupation to contribute to soft, supple hands.

[10]Michael Slater, p. 285.

[11]Steven Marcus, Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey, p. 142.

[12]Ibid., p. 163.

[13]Angus Wilson, The World of Charles Dickens, p. 95.

[14]Nell's spirits revive during the brief period that she is able to make herself useful to Mrs Jarley. Since then, her spiritual decline continues unchecked.

[15]Arnold Kettle, "Our Mutual Friend," in Dickens and the Twentieth Century, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 218.

[16]Wilson, The World of Charles Dickens, p. 95.

[17]Ibid., p. 96.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Slater, Dickens and Women, p. 341.

[20]Wilson, The World of Charles Dickens, p. 96.

[21]Slater, Dickens and Women, p. 339.

[22]Ibid., p. 347.

Chapter IV

[1]Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1983), p. 224.

[2]George Gissing, Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens (New York: Haskell House, 1965), p. 82.

[3]J. Hillis Miller, "Martin Chuzzlewit," in Dickens: Modern Judgements, ed. A. E. Dyson (London: Macmillan and Company, 1968), p. 137.

[4]Grahame Smith, Dickens, Money and Society (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 2.

[5]George Gissing, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (London: Blackie and Son Limited, 1926), p. 141.

[6]Grahame Smith, p. 3.

[7]Slater, p. 370.

[8]Gissing, Critical Study (1926), p. 144.

[9]Slater, p. 228.

[10]Barbara Hardy, "The Complexity of Dickens," in Dickens Centenary Essays, ed. Michael Slater (London: Chapman and Hall, 1970), p. 40.

Chapter V

[1]George Gissing, Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens (New York: Haskell House, 1965), p. 131.

[2]Philip Collins, Dickens and Education (London: Macmillan and Company, 1964), p. 198.

[3]Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1983), p. 8.

Chapter VI

[1]John Holloway, "Dickens and the Symbol," in Dickens Centenary Essays, ed. Michael Slater (London: Chapman and Hall, 1970), p. 67.

[2]Angus Wilson, The World of Charles Dickens (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd., 1970), p. 134.

[3]Wilson, p. 134.

[4]Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1983), p. 323.

[5]Slater, p. 323.

[6]Slater, p. 322.

Conclusion

[1]George Orwell, "Charles Dickens," in Dickens, Dali and Others (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1946), p. 45.

[2]Orwell, p. 37.

[3]Orwell, p. 47.

[4]Orwell, p. 45.

[5]Orwell, p. 6.

[6]Orwell, p. 25.

[7]Orwell, p. 22.

[8]Orwell, p. 75.

[9]Alexander Welsh, The City of Dickens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 75.

[10]Welsh, p. 84.

[11]Welsh, p. 99.

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_____. The Old Curiosity Shop. Ed. Angus Easson. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Limited, 1972.

_____. Martin Chuzzlewit. Ed. P. N. Furbank. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Limited, 1968.

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_____. Bleak House. Ed. Norman Page. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Limited, 1971.

_____. Hard Times. Ed. David Craig. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Limited, 1969.

_____. Little Dorrit. Ed. John Holloway. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Limited, 1967.

_____. A Tale of Two Cities. Ed. George Woodcock. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Limited, 1970.

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